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RAY LEWIS

ONE ON ONE

AN EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW
WITH MARVIN R. SHANKEN

NFL SEASON PREDICTIONS

BY DANNY SHERIDAN

IRELAND'S STUNNING GOLF COURSES

WALKING DEAD'S MICHAEL CUDLITZ

81 CIGARS RATED





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Dan Snow

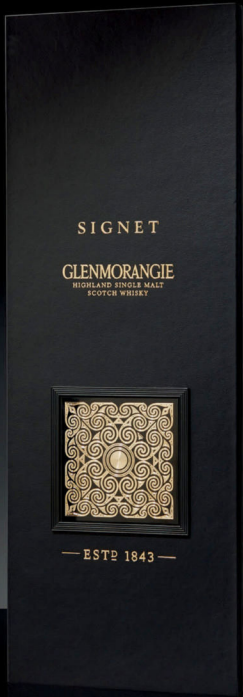
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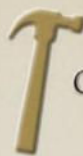
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ON THE COVER

Ray Lewis' stunning career grew out of adversity.
photograph by David Yellen

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116



125



148

highlights

When cigar lovers wax poetic about the Romeo y Julieta brand, they typically rave about the long and legendary Churchill (or one of its many new smaller incarnations: Petit, Short or Wide). We would suggest a sample of the Romeo Belicoso. It's not a new size, but it has been terribly hard to find for many years. Today, it's in relatively good supply, and smoking quite well—a recent version garnered our highest rating of the issue as well as our best-ever score for the brand in that size. A second Cuban, the relatively new Partagás Serie E No. 2, proved its superiority in the toro, or corona gorda, category, while a third took top honors in robustos. Two cigars from the Fuente family, an Ashton Heritage and a consistently superb Fuente Fuente OpusX Double Corona, scored 92, and a skinny Illusione continued to build on the stellar heritage of the boutique brand by scoring 91 points to lead all panetelas.



TOP FIGURADO ROMEO Y JULIETA BELICOSO

While it's not the most popular of Cuban cigars, this gorgeous, shapely Romeo can be a memorable smoke. This is the highest score it has ever received.

CUBA

94



TOP CORONA GORDA PARTAGÁS SERIE E NO. 2

Longer and fatter than the ever-popular Serie D No. 4, this creamy, sweet Havana smoke is carving out a reputation for consistent quality.

CUBA

93



TOP CHURCHILL ASHTON HERITAGE PURO SOL CHURCHILL

This Fuente-made brand is a top performer in our ratings, often scoring in the high 80s or in the 90s and delivering a pleasant mix of sweet and savory notes.

DOM. REP.

92



TOP DOUBLE CORONA FUENTE FUENTE OPUSX DOUBLE CORONA

A former CIGAR AFICIONADO Cigar of the Year, this stately puro is an iconic full-bodied smoke.

DOM. REP.

92



TOP ROBUSTO LA GLORIA CUBANA REVOLUTION EXCLUSIVO ASIA PACÍFICO

Cuba's popular Regional Edition program delivers intriguing cigars from smaller brands, and this chunky robusto is among the best of the current crop.

CUBA

92



TOP PANETELA ILLUSIONE HL

It's hard to name a boutique cigar brand with better ratings than Illusione. This skinny smoke earned it yet another score of 90 points or higher.

NICARAGUA

91

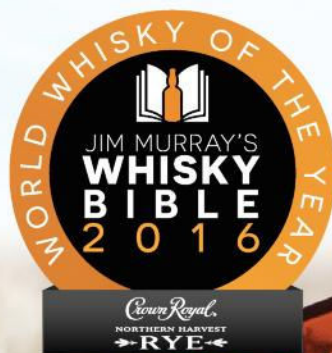


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The Real Ray Lewis

Watching Ray Lewis play football is simply unforgettable. The man is a powerhouse, with a seemingly infinite amount of athleticism, the ability to know where to be on defense at all times and leadership skills that motivate his teammates. As a passionate fan of the Miami Hurricanes, I watched him play during the 1990s and I remember seeing him dominate in the Super Bowls he won with the Baltimore Ravens, one that earned him MVP honors.

But it wasn't Ray Lewis the football player who inspired me to interview him. It was Ray Lewis the man.

In April, Lewis joined us at CIGAR AFICIONADO'S Night to Remember charity dinner, and I invited him to the podium to say a few words. I honestly didn't know what to expect. His brief speech—about his cigar-smoking grandfather, who he called “Papa”—was riveting and inspirational. I had to know more.

I then read his autobiography—*I Feel Like Going On*—which detailed his life, an amazing journey from the very basement of poverty to the top of the world. His father left him when he was born, leaving him and his mother—only 15 years old at the time—alone. Lewis wasn't even named after his biological father; his name is that of a family friend. He suffered as a boy, watching his mom being beaten by various men. The abuse drove him to strengthen his body, drove him to overcome the obstacles in his path. Football was salvation, an escape route from poverty and oppression. It allowed him to thrive and to help his mother.

Football made him a star, first with the Miami Hurricanes then with the Baltimore Ravens. He became the leader of that new franchise, the superstar of a defense that some believe was one of the best to ever take the field.

Football also brought him controversy, highlighted by a charge of double murder after a Super Bowl party in Atlanta in 2000. The charge could have ruined his career, and despite being found not guilty a cloud still hangs over him today. The lead detective in the case told CIGAR AFICIONADO that Lewis should never have been charged in the first place.

Lewis came to my office. We lit cigars, sat down and began to talk. I wanted to hear more. Wanted to hear about his remarkable life's journey in his own words. The conversation was captivating. I invite you to read the interview, to get to know the real Ray Lewis. (And because the man is such a passionate speaker, we took video of the conversation—you can watch clips of the interview at cigaraficionado.com.)

Do you think you know the real Ray Lewis? I bet you don't.

Read the interview. It's one you won't soon forget.

MARVIN R. SHANKEN
EDITOR & PUBLISHER

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out of the humidor

Dear Marvin,

Many who feel morally superior have a need to impose their personal beliefs through regulatory prohibition. The most famous example is the Volstead Act of 1919, which prohibited the manufacture, sale and distribution of alcoholic beverages.

During the prohibition of alcohol, crime rose 24 percent, drug addiction rose 44 percent and thousands died from government-ordered poisoning of industrial alcohol. Prohibiting any desired activity makes it more dangerous. We have seen this with opiates, illegal gambling, criminalized abortion and prostitution.

The agents of moral conduct have set their sights on tobacco. The plan is to create a tobacco-free society by taxing tobacco and restricting its use in increments until smoking goes away. It is interesting that as tobacco laws become more restrictive, marijuana laws become more lax.

We should oppose these efforts for the following reasons: 1) It won't work—just like it didn't work for alcohol, marijuana and prostitution. 2) It will encourage organized crime. 3) It will make tobacco more expensive and of dubious quality. 4) It is not the business of government to tell me whether I can enjoy an occasional cigar or pipe.

I am disturbed by the high degree of resignation on the part of cigar and pipe smokers. Those in the pipe community openly talk about the coming “tobacco apocalypse.” They hoard tobacco, but feel hopeless against the tide of regulation and taxation.

Most of the cigar and pipe smokers I encounter are people of substance. They are smart, successful, law abiding and good citizens. We have power, but we don't claim it.

I hope your readers will vote for politicians who have no desire to impose their personal moral codes on the rest of us. I encourage cigar smokers to use the ballot box to get the government out of our wallets and our humidors.

Tom Cody

Vicksburg, Mississippi

Editors' Response: We agree wholeheartedly. The government has no business in our humidors. Handmade cigars are a legal product enjoyed by an adult audience, and any efforts by the government to curtail that enjoyment is an attack on our freedom, and a policy that's certain to fail.

Dear Marvin,

As a subscriber since your first issue, I have always been pleased with your enlightened policy towards relations with Cuba. But some of the sentiments expressed in the Editors' Note [“A Visit To



“I hope your readers will vote for politicians who have no desire to impose their personal moral codes on the rest of us.”

—Tom Cody, Vicksburg, Mississippi

Cuba, June 2016] are troubling. You suggest that we may be in danger of “losing our way.” But is it “we” who are in danger or you?

First, you speak of Raúl Castro making “demands” such as the end of the embargo and the closing of the base at Guantanamo. Those aren't demands, just a wish list. The president of Cuba knows there's little likelihood of these things happening any time soon.

More disconcerting is your comment that President Obama should have been “demanding change.” You never specify the demands you mean. I believe we should make the same demands for change that we have made on China, Vietnam, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and so many other less-than-democratic regimes with whom we enjoy fully normalized relations—that is to say, none. Otherwise, we look like a big powerful country trying to bully a tiny country—which is exactly how we have appeared to the rest of the world ever since the end of the Cold War.

Marc Kaplan

Santa Monica, California

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E-MAIL letters@cigaraficionado.com • **LETTERS** 825 8th Ave., 33rd floor, New York, NY 10019 • **EDITORS' BLOGS** Find out what the editors of CIGAR AFICIONADO are thinking—and smoking—in our editors' blogs. David Savona, Gordon Mott, Jack Bettridge, Gregory Mottola and Andrew Nagy want to hear from you. The conversation is taking place on cigaraficionado.com.

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Printed in the U.S.A.

A publication of M. Shanken Communications, Inc.
Worldwide Plaza, 825 Eighth Avenue, New York, NY 10019
212/684-4224 fax: 212/684-5424 e-mail: letters@cigaraficionado.com

VOL. 24 NO. 6

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Dear Marvin,

As I thumb through my latest issue of CIGAR AFICIONADO I'm baffled at the Editors' Note [Obama Administration Overregulates Cigars, August 2016]. I don't understand how you can blame the Obama Administration for this new anti-tobacco legislation when the bill was passed by a Republican controlled Congress. It appears your thoughts could have as easily been titled "Republican Congress Supports Overregulation." How about a little bit of balance in your editorials?

Steven Pascal

Boston, Massachusetts

Editors' Response: President Obama signed the Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act—which gave the FDA control over the U.S. tobacco industry—into law in 2009 under the 111th Congress, which had a Democratic majority. Plus, more than three times as many Democrats in the House voted in favor of the bill (H.R. 1256) than Republicans. By contrast, 104 Republicans voted against the same bill while only eight Democrats voted no.

Dear Marvin,

While I am new to your magazine, I have been smoking cigars for more than 30 years. This came about accidentally, but once I had my first cigar, I was hooked. For many years I worked in countries outside the U.S.A. where Cuban cigars were available and, I must add, relatively less expensive than in most countries. My job involved a lot of travel to and through countries in the Middle East and the Gulf. Beirut, Lebanon and Dubai were my favorites as their duty-free shops had one of the widest variety of Cuban cigars found anywhere, with the possible exception of Cuba. I think Beirut's duty-free shops are better stocked and people working there understand cigars better than those in Dubai.

I tried many of the Cuban cigars available and finally settled on Cohiba. I smoked a Cohiba Robusto in the morning and a Siglo VI in the evening. You can imagine how excited I was when, a couple of issues back, I found your article about that same cigar that was my absolute favorite. That article in particular and your magazine in general, made me appreciate and enjoy the pleasure of smoking a Cuban cigar even more.

Alas, having been retired and relocated to the U.S.A., it is very difficult to find and enjoy such a cigar. I am lucky as I still take one trip a year to the Middle East. On this trip, which normally lasts for three weeks, I get the chance to enjoy a good Cuban cigar. While in the United States, I use your magazine as my guide to find good Nicaraguan or Dominican cigars to sample. I keep varying the types I smoke as I am still hoping that the U.S. will soon allow the importation of Cuban cigars and I can revert to smoking my favorite Cohibas.

Tony Awad

Alpharetta, Georgia ❖



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LA HISTORIA



Nº2
Top 10/2014

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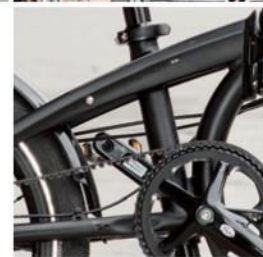
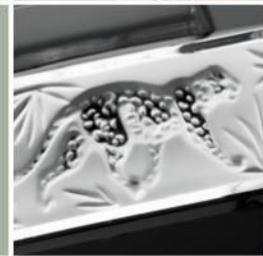
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good life guide

Living well demands that we indulge in things that are of superior quality and excellent origin. This guide aspires to find and recommend the best of everything to aficionados of the good life.

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Prices have come down at La Palina

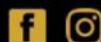


"How did my helicopter get in my pool?"
-William Paley - Owner, La Palina

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Focal Utopia Headphones

Just placing them on your head, it's obvious that no expense was spared in the making of Focal's new Utopia headphones. Weighing a little more than a pound, the unit has an adjustable yoke forged out of carbon fiber for strength, practicality and attractiveness. The super-soft, lambskin leather used in the headband and ear cups is sourced from Pittards, a renowned United Kingdom leather supplier that's been around since 1826.

But remarkable comfort alone isn't what justifies the \$3,999 price tag. The 35-year-old French company known for creating some of the world's most respected high-end audio technologies has created a pair of wearable cans that are essentially on par with high-end speakers. To achieve this, the company turned to a rare element called beryllium, which is roughly 30 times the cost of gold. Focal's engineers were able to use beryllium's incredible rigidity-to-weight ratio to create a driver with a completely open front and back, thus avoiding any crossover or passive filtering that's a common flaw in lower-end headphones. This means that the 40-mm driver can vibrate up to 50,000 times a second, resulting in a frequency response range from 5Hz to 50kHz. Utopia produces a sound that is at once airy, but sonically accurate and pure.

The 13-foot cable that the headphones come with would by itself be an audiophile's dream. Its innards are composed of Oxygen Free Copper, a highly conductive material meant to reduce impedance. Two shielded, locking, bayonet-style Lemo connectors attach it to the phones. A Neutrik stereo jack plugs it into your sound system. And to drive these phones, you'll need a stereo system, not just a portable player. But that's the point: they are intended to be enjoyed while sitting in the comfort of home, listening to music through a high-end audio system. However, forfeiting the portability that MP3 files and other compressed audio formats provide may be a small price to pay. It is no secret that, when compared with physical CDs and vinyl records, digitized MP3 recordings are inferior in sound quality. Audiophiles have known this for years, and typical consumers are now picking up on it as well. The Utopia phones are aimed at the listener who craves full analog, but simply wants to listen in singular privacy without the compromises of low-quality earbuds. If purity of sound is something you seek in your music, then Focal's Utopia are a must-have item.

Visit focal.com

—Andrew Nagy





Mercedes-Benz E300

The stuff of science fiction is rapidly becoming everyday reality, especially when it comes to automobiles. By the end of the decade, we may see the first fully self-driving cars. And the completely made over 2017 Mercedes-Benz E300 will get you amazingly close today. The new E-Class sedan (always popular for introducing new technology) can now not only operate its brakes, accelerator and steering wheel without driver intervention, but can pass another car in traffic.

As you sit behind the wheel, what's bound to catch your eye are the twin video screens, a 12.3-inch LCD display operating the updated comand infotainment system, and a second, reconfigurable display replacing conventional, analog gauges on all but base models. Those two huge screens help you manage a high-tech fantasyland of features that come just a few inches short of fully autonomous driving. There's the latest version of Mercedes' oddly named Distronic Plus adaptive cruise control system, which not only holds to the speed of traffic without driver intervention, but can bring you to a stop when traffic snarls. It will hit the brakes on its own to avoid an accident if you don't react quickly enough. And you can even tap the turn signal and let the E300 pass a slower vehicle without you touching the wheel.

Well, you actually have to put your hands on the wheel every 30 seconds or so. Mercedes isn't comfortable with full, hands-off motor-ing just yet, even on limited-access highways. But the German maker is planning to allow over-the-air updates, much like a smartphone, and it may add hands-free operation before it's time to trade in. Another



feature Mercedes plans to activate a year or so from now will allow the E300 not only to park itself with minimal driver intervention, but even to remotely pull out of a parking spot and fetch you, simply by tapping a button on the key fob.

From a visual standpoint, the 2017 Mercedes E300 is handsome, adopting the more curvaceous, coupe-like roofline of the maker's CLS model. The new sedan gets a taut and sculpted body, a more muscular and planted look than past E-Class models. The interior, meanwhile, takes on a new level of refinement, especially if you opt for the distinctive, open-pore wood trim. At a starting price of \$52,150, plus \$925 in delivery fees, the E300 features a peppy, turbo four making 241 horsepower. The sedan will be followed by a wagon, and other body styles, including a coupe, are in the works.

Mercedes bills the new E300 as "the world's most intelligent automobile," and it's hard to dispute that. Expect to spend a fair bit of time learning how to operate all these new features, however. We spent three days behind the wheel and still found ourselves struggling to get the hang of all that technology. But it's quite a ride when it all comes together.

Visit mbusa.com

—Paul A. Eisenstein

A close-up, angled view of a Cohiba Macassar cigar box. The box has a dark wood grain pattern. The brand name 'COHIBA' is printed in white with a red dot over the 'O', and 'MACASSAR' is printed in white below it. A silver band on the side of the box also features the brand name and 'MACASSAR' in red. In the bottom left corner, a single Cohiba Macassar cigar is shown, featuring a silver band with the brand name and 'MACASSAR' in black.

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Fine Crystal Ashtrays

It seems as though many makers of traditional luxury goods have lost faith in the casual smoker and discontinued any items even remotely pertaining to cigars. Thankfully, the world's finest crystaliers have refused to turn their backs on the cigar enthusiast, offering interesting crystal ashtrays that bring a bit of Park Avenue directly into the smoking den.

In their undying respect for cigar culture, France's finest glass masters—Lalique, Baccarat and Saint-Louis—produce crystal cigar ashtrays that are thoughtfully cast yet at the same time ingeniously designed to blend into almost any environment. No conservatory is too dainty, nor man cave too masculine, nor study too austere, that it can't benefit from a bit of fine, decorative crystal.

Consider the expressive contrast between clear and translucent crystal on the four-sided Lalique Jungle Ashtray (pictured, bottom, \$2,100). Embossed jaguars prowl the sides of this piece in twinkling relief against a frosted surface—the same signature frosted surface that endeared America's wealthy class to Lalique's vases and hood ornaments in the 1920s. In this case, the ashtray's misty satin-finish adequately says Lalique without screaming it.

Jaguars and jungles a little too Kiplingesque? Saint-Louis, Europe's oldest glassmaker, makes its statement in a less literal fashion by relying on deep geometrical grooves along with simple transparency. According to Saint-Louis (owned by Hermès International S.A.), the Adiante Cigar Ashtray (top, \$785) gets its inspiration from the Art Deco period. No matter the era, its clever ridges and bevels result in a charming circular design that few rooms would reject.

The studios at Baccarat have fully embraced the cigar smoker with the striking, six-sided Harcourt Abysses Ashtray (center, \$845). The hexagonal Harcourt design, based on Baccarat's oldest pattern, comes to life rather brilliantly in ashtray form. With its flat cuts and series of bold angles, it's almost as if Baccarat specifically chose this shape to defy the stuffy notion that all crystal ashtrays have to look like candy dishes.

For those who might be suspicious of the term “crystal” (and the high price that comes with it), it's defined by the European Union as glass with a minimum 24 percent lead content, which lends the material a flawless optical clarity—and signature heft—otherwise unattained.

Visit lalique.com, saint-louis.com, us.baccarat.com

—Gregory Mottola



THE OVERNIGHT
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20 YEARS, IN
THE MAKING

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aficionado



93
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Skull Tourbillons

They may seem like a recent punk fashion, but objects decorated with skull and crossbones have been with us for thousands of years as reminders that life is short and should be lived to the fullest. (In Latin *memento mori*, or “remember that you must die.”) Skull-themed watches—perfect devices for marking our numbered days, hours and minutes—have a fascinating history that dates at least to 1504 with a piece credited to German watchmaker Peter Henlein, who specialized in portable, ornamental clocks meant as badges of excessive wealth.

Mary Queen of Scots bestowed another 16th-Century example on her maid of honor, Mary Seaton. Shaped like a skull and elaborately engraved with religious scenes, figures of Death and lines from the poems of Horace, it has a hinged jaw that reveals the dial with a single HOUR HAND, and the movement occupies the space where the brain would be.

A more modern treasure is Richard Mille’s \$720,000 RM 52-01 Tourbillon Skull Nano-ceramic (left), a one-of-a-kind descendant of the 2013 model, which was limited to 30 pieces. Distinguished by different gems, each unique skull tourbillon expresses not only Mille’s renegade style of watchmaking, but also displays his inspired use of cutting-edge materials rarely seen in watches. The watch’s case is made of a groundbreaking composite material called nano-ceramic, while the case back and bezel are TZP, made from 95 percent yttrium-stabilized zirconium, which provides extreme scratch-resistance. A carbon-nanotube inner

case protects the manually wound tourbillon movement from shocks.

Exotic materials also endow Hublot’s 45mm Classic Fusion Skull Tourbillon Black Skull (center, \$114,900) with robustness and lightness. The case, crown and dial elements are made of micro-blasted ceramic-coated aluminum, which wears as hard as ceramic at half the weight. A 3-D machining process sculpts the bridges of the skeleton tourbillon into bony shapes. An open-worked skull-shaped barret, or bridge, secures the spinning tourbillon at 6 O’CLOCK.

While skull motifs have been in Peter Speake-Marin’s repertoire for more than a decade, this year marks the first time the English watchmaker has produced a skull-themed tourbillon. The Skull Face to Face Tourbillon (right, \$155,000) is limited to eight pieces. The 18-karat red-gold dial is etched using a special chemical process to depict two skulls facing each other on each side of the hand-finished 60-second Magister Tourbillon spinning in an aperture at 6 O’CLOCK. The bezel is set with 36 baguette gems in a nod to the notion that, unlike us, “diamonds are forever.”

Those whose pockets aren’t deep enough for an ultra-complicated skull tourbillon set with precious gems can still get into the *memento mori* spirit with more approachable watches from Bell & Ross, Pierre DeRoche, Romain Jerome and others. *Tempus fugit, so carpe diem!*

Visit richardmille.com, hublot.com, speake-marin.com

—Laurie Kahle



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Cal-a-Vie Health Spa, Vista California

Life is a wake-up call at the Cal-a-Vie Health Spa. If you think the spa culture is entirely too sedate, too precious, maybe even too feminine, Cal-a-Vie could change your mind. It did for Rick Holton, a venture capitalist from St. Louis, whose wife Kristen came back from a visit with a friend and made a request. Or was it an order?

"She and Stephanie went last year and came back and said you guys are going with us next year," says Holton. "I was not really looking forward to it. It turned out to be an amazing experience."

Cal-a-Vie is the creation of Houston businessman John Havens and his wife Terri, a more than 200-acre property in the low coastal mountains an hour north of San Diego and a light-year away from everyday life. The passionate Francophiles built a tiny French village with a purpose: to provide a complete environment of physical and mental well-being in a charming, caring and invigorating atmosphere.

While you could come to Cal-a-Vie and indulge in nothing more than power pampering, that's not what its guests seem to want.

"I didn't realize that half your day was exercise and working out," says Holton. "I always envisioned them just hanging out with cucumbers on their eyes and towels on their heads."

A look at the extensive menu of workouts and therapies complemented with a flock of massages and wraps and skin treatments shows a lot going on. And boy, can you get a workout.

It can all start very early, with a long walk before 7 A.M., followed by a communal breakfast followed by workouts from mild to wild with exuberant instructors. The list includes regimens titled Muscles on Fire, No Guts No Glory, R.I.P.P.E.D. (for resistance, interval, power, plyometric and endurance), and Piloxing (combining pilates with boxing and dance). There is

a two-hour triathlon workout (running, swimming, cycling) and aquatic regimens that include submerged cycling machines for resistance spinning.

Afternoons see a change from sweats to robes, from working out to being worked on. Among the many therapies is vinotherapy, in which the by-products of the spa's vineyard, said to be antioxidant rich, are used on the skin. Different scrubs and buffs and wraps can fill an entire week.

Nutrition is an equally important component of the Cal-a-Vie experience and executive chef Curtis Cooke plucks from his own garden and orchard along with locally obtained products to produce his communal meals. Everyone eats the same food together (some individual requests can be accommodated), and Cooke will put on demonstrations in the spa's L'Orangerie, a 17th-Century building from Dijon, France, that was disassembled and erected stone by stone, as was the chapel on site.

The French influence is everywhere, including furniture and tapestries from Louis XIV and XV in public spaces and some furniture and accoutrements can be purchased in the spa's store, as can the spa's wine, a red blend of the property's cabernet, merlot and cabernet franc vines.

Cigar smokers have a real perk. The spa owns the Vista Valley Country Club right next door, and guests have playing and smoking privileges there. The clubhouse has three outdoor terraces that can accommodate cigar smoking and offers a nice range of cigars.

The spa offers three-, four- and seven-night packages (starting at \$4,150), and there is plenty of planning before the visit and upon arrival to assure an experience tailor-made to each guest.

It's nothing less than Cal-a-Vie's way, which is *c'est magnifique*.

Visit cal-a-vie.com

—Jeff Williams



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SURGEON GENERAL WARNING:
Cigars Are Not A Safe Alternative To Cigarettes.

Wide World of Cognac

On the nose you get a nuanced meeting of delicate fruits with oak, nuts and vanilla. On the palate come pears, ripe berries, cocoa and toffee. It's the hallmark elegance and complexity of one of the hyperpremium Cognacs crafted by big houses like Hennessy or Rémy, with their vast storehouses of aged wine and spirits. Except this is from family-owned Frapin, which makes single-estate brandies, with its own grapes fermented, distilled and aged in-house. Such finds populate the widening options of the modern Cognac market.

While Cognac touts one of the most exclusive definitions in the spirits world—it arises strictly from about 200,000 acres of vineyard surrounding the southwestern French town for which it is named—the region's output is multi-dimensional. First there's terroir, with six official growing regions—including the chalk-rich soils of Grande and Petit Champagne, the flint and clay of Borderies and the clay and limestone of Fins Bois—with their distinctive flavors that can add to a blend or be enjoyed singularly. Cognac is also defined in age groups. XO (soon to be elevated to a minimum 10 years) is the oldest, but most in that category are far older and brandies like Louis XIII and Paradis can be almost antique.

What's not so obvious is that Cognac is filled with small, independent growers and distillers who feed the four big houses (Courvoisier, Hennessy, Martel and Rémy Martin). Some are now distinguishing themselves in novel ways. Pierre Ferrand puts much stock in terroir, limiting its vineyards, as does Frapin, to the prized Grande Champagne region. Camus has boldly featured a lesser-esteemed region with a Cognac made from the far west island of Ile de Ré. Tesseron blends only brandies that are XO or above. D'Usse concentrates on full-flavored Cognac. Extra-limited Cognacs are the specialty of Nicolas Palazzi's PM Spirits. He scours tiny producers like Jacky Navarre and bottles their brandy at a proof that is cask strength with no additives.

A brash, new approach comes from Bache-Gabrielsen. American Oak in its Natur & Eleganse range is made by aging Cognac in traditional French limousine oak for two years and then transferring it for finishing in American oak for six months.

With the American market for Cognac heating up, we can expect to see more such innovations in the future. But one thing will remain the same: Cognac will always be a fine pairing for a fine cigar.

—Jack Bettridge



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Pocket Watches

My pocket watch collection began, quite by accident, on a train journey across Russia in the 1990s. I found myself in the station at Yekaterinburg with nothing to do, nothing to read, and—seemingly—nothing to buy, when something in a display caught my eye: a stainless steel pocket watch with an ornately carved exterior case that, when opened, revealed a classic-style dial with an elaborately engraved face. It went for the then-grand post-Soviet price of \$20.

It came with a simple chain and I wore it in the simplest way: in the aptly named watch pocket of my jeans or slacks, with the chain threaded through my belt loop. I liked taking the watch out and opening the cover—taking 15 seconds or so to check the time seemed to be a nice antidote to the emerging wired world. Little did I know, it was the onset of a personal fetish.

This basic belt loop chain seemed fine on the trans-Siberian railroad, but back in London it was a bit too casual. In a town known for excellent tailoring, and a place where 150 years ago a well-made pocket watch was a hallowed sign of success, tailors, jewelers and watchmakers still argue over the proper way to wear a fine pocket watch, but the clear consensus is that a watch kept in the pants' pocket is pure folly—it's too easily damaged.

A quality pocket watch is meant to be worn in a vest or the breast

pocket of a suit, says Mark Hearn, managing director of Patek Philippe U.K., one of a number of prestige watchmakers including Audemars Piguet, Wempe and Breguet that still make pocket watches. (A market for used and antique watches also thrives.) Instead of a simple fob, he advocates a vest chain—some are known in England as an “Albert” chain or the more elaborate “double Albert”—like the one he wears with his Patek pocket watch, which dates back to 1909.

“I love it and I wear it often,” he says. “There’s definitely a move back toward pocket watches. It’s not a major move but today if you talk with people, they have a greater awareness.” He attributes some of this to current fashion: the three-piece suit is reemerging. This advice provides a perfect excuse to add more vests to your collection—and, inevitably, more watches from the long list of varieties: open-face, hunter (with a cover that closes), double hunter and half-hunter (with a crystal window in the cover), etc. Whichever you choose, it brings pleasant rituals: the morning winding and the taking it out several times a day just to make sure your smartphone’s got it right.

Visit audemarspiguet.com, breguet.com, patekphilippe.com, wempe.com

—Gregory Katz

The marine effect
of Monterey.
Perfect for Mer Soleil.

Charlie Wagner



The Mer (sea) Soleil (sun) name tells you a lot about the wines in the bottle. Charlie Wagner's barrel-fermented Reserve Chardonnay is creamy, rich and balanced with lively acidity, while his unoaked SILVER Chardonnay, fermented in cement tanks, has aromas of fruit blossoms with a bright citrus taste. Both wines capture a pure expression of the natural forces at work in the family's Mer Soleil Vineyard in the Santa Lucia Highlands.

A cool vintage with the vines reaching full maturity October 1 thru November 1st before the onset of winter. Fermented and aged in French oak barrels. 14.5% alc. by vol. **2014** vintage / 750ml —Wagner Family of Wine—

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Our Metropolitan Selection has been a mainstay in the Nat Sherman premium cigar portfolio for more than twenty years. These cigars are hand made in the Dominican Republic, with the Original featuring a Connecticut Shade Wrapper and the Maduro featuring a Connecticut Broadleaf Wrapper. These Classic Collections are now expanding to include the Metropolitan Habano, crafted in Nicaragua and available in 5 vitolas. This Nicaraguan Puro brings a “new

world” offering to the traditional Metropolitan Selection. Along with the introduction of the Habano blend, we’re updating the presentation of the Original Metropolitan Connecticut and Maduro for a more consistent look and feel across the trio of blends. Rest assured, the Original Metropolitan Connecticut and Maduro cigars will remain unchanged, maintaining the same consistency people have come to expect for over two decades.



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For more information, call 800-221-1690. natsherman.com

WARNING: Smoking cigars regularly poses risks of cancer of the mouth, throat, larynx, and esophagus similar to smoking cigarettes.



Tern Verge S8i Folding Bicycle

Snaking gently through the gridlock amid a cacophony of car horns while riding my trusty Tern Verge S8i, I pull up on the sidewalk near a subway entrance in Brooklyn. With one hand on the seat, I unclasp the bike's two joint locks located on the top tube and handlebars, and in one swift, smooth motion, fold the front wheel until it magnetically locks next to the back wheel. With one hand on the seat, I roll the collapsed bike down the steps and into a packed subway car, where I'm able to neatly place it between my legs.

Given America's historic love affair with the automobile, it may be hard to believe that the number of bicycle commuters in U.S. cities has increased 60 percent in the last decade. One driver of the movement is the folding bike that allows riders to store their equipment while they move seamlessly from the street to urban transportation. Sure, road bikes are better for long distances and mountain bikes are essential for off-roading, but both require storage racks and sturdy locks to avoid theft. The gentleman commuter should choose Tern's Verge S8i folding bicycle (\$2,100), a machine that adapts to his lifestyle, rather than vice versa.



The Verge S8i takes about 10 seconds to transform into its small stature and can be easily kept under your office desk. Additionally, many businesses will allow it inside while you run errands, and the S8i can be stowed away in the overhead bin of an airplane should you choose to bring it on vacation.

Smaller wheels and a step-through frame are the hallmarks of the S8i, but it's also fairly lightweight and durable and sports an impressive groupset.

Engineered to be ultralow maintenance, the S8i eschews a traditional metal chain in favor of a Gates Carbon Belt Drivetrain, thus requiring no messy oil that can splatter on your office pants. The Shimano Alfine internal gear hub quietly shifts between eight gears, and Shimano Deore hydraulic disc brakes provide stopping power even in slick conditions. Its Andros handlebars can be adjusted by hand, with options to set up high for a more comfortable ride, or down low in more of a racing position.

Rounding out the bike's features are front and back lights that are powered by pedaling, puncture-resistant tires and front and rear fenders that protect from rain and road debris.

Visit ternbicycles.com

—Andrew Nagy

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The SOLERA method of aging has been used for centuries in the making of wine, sherry, rum and brandy. Now for the first time we are using the SOLERA system by combining different vintages of tobacco at different stages of the aging process to obtain a fuller flavor and more complex cigar.



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No.2 Cigar of 2013
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Aged Beef

With many foods, fresh is considered best as we buy produce that's been raced to market and carefully check sell-by dates on dairy products. Yet the true royalty of the meat world is aged beef, a food that, like fine cigars, whiskeys and wines, clings to the virtues of time well spent in slow curing. While it may seem a contradiction to anyone who has watched meat spoil in the refrigerator, hanging up cuts for as long as six weeks before selling them is the path to attaining the utmost in flavor and tenderness. But it also is a preparation that adds so much expense to the process that aged beef is rarely available outside of the best steak restaurants and the most select meat purveyors. Furthermore, the uninitiated may need to develop a taste for its richness.

"The connoisseur knows the difference, there's no question about it," says Stanley Lobel, the president of Lobel's of New York, which is now in its fifth generation of providing fine, aged cuts both through its local storefront and (more recently) by order over the Internet. He summarizes the aging process for which his company holds a patent: cuts as large as sides, but mostly in smaller portions like strips and short loins, are hung in large humidity-free rooms that are refrigerated to near freezing. The aging is performed bone-in and with layers of fat covering the meat, otherwise it

will rot and become moldy, he explains. The cuts are dated and regularly rotated until they reach six weeks. During that time the marbling in the meat releases its flavor and the fibers break down as a result of natural enzymes. The expense in time is compounded by the necessity to trim the cuts to get to the red meat hidden inside. Moisture loss and trimming account for a weight drop of as much as 30 percent.

Lobel says that only prime meat is worthy of dry aging, which further adds to the cost. "The quality of the meat is incredibly important. The more graining, the more flavor and tenderness." The breed of cattle is less important. "There's a lot of hype [about breeds] but you have to look for the marbling, the color of fat, the color of the bone." All cuts worthy of aging are aged at Lobel's. One notable exception is ground meat for hamburger and steak tartare. The grinding process opens it up to airborne microorganisms.

The service's website also offers recipes and hints for cooking its precious meats. Lobel points out that aged beef cooks quicker than the standard product, which is a money-saving tip for those who like their \$120 a pound Wagyu Porterhouse done rare.

Visit lobels.com

—Jack Bettridge



The stillroom at The Glenlivet Distillery.

Visit a Distillery

For the whiskey lover—and there are a lot of us out there now—a visit to the distillery of a favorite brand is a bucket-list no-brainer, ranking right up there with playing St Andrew's for golfers. But you don't have to be a whiskey geek to enjoy the experience. Distilleries have ways to charm even brown-spirits neophytes—not the least of which are the come-hither aromas. (My own wine-loving wife exclaimed, “It smells like maple candy,” upon entering a barrel-aging warehouse, and it convinced her to try Bourbon for the first time.)

Autumn is a beautiful time to visit their typically picturesque settings and also coincides with the time that many stills go back online after summer maintenance. Seeing a plant in full swing will boost the educational value. You'll find that all still houses have commonalities. (The process starts with water, grain and yeast, which are made into beer in huge vats. Those feed stills, which increase alcohol percentage. The spirit is then stored in casks.) But the idiosyncrasies are what distinguish their products and make multiple distillery tours worthwhile.

Scotland is fairly dotted with distilleries in five regions (Lowland, Highland, Speyside, Islay and Islands), which reflect very different geography and spirit style. The quaint landscape of the Lowlands predicts its lighter flavors, just as the pounding surf and peat bogs of Islay speak of its sea spray and smoky notes. As single malts are all made of pure barley, recipes don't differ, but pay attention to the shape of the pot

stills as they often account for how heavy or light a dram will be.

Most of the dozen or so Kentucky Bourbon and Tennessee whiskey distillers use equipment fairly similar to one another and sit in a landscape set on limestone, which provides soft water, good for whiskey and race horses. But their grain recipes (including corn, rye or wheat, and barley) can vary tremendously. So can their aging conditions. Each rickhouse may contain several microclimates by temperatures and humidity.

Consolidation of the industry has shrunk Ireland's once ubiquitous distilling operations, but new facilities and the reopening of shuttered ones have expanded visiting opportunities. Some, like the old Jameson distillery in Dublin, are simply museum experiences. (Jameson and its sister spirits have long been made at the Midleton distillery.) However, Teeling recently returned distilling to Dublin. Expect to learn about the importance of the island's many varieties, from poteen to pot-stilled to blends.

New microdistilleries have also enlarged visiting venues. Check schedules and make reservations when possible, especially with smaller operations. Charges vary from free to just covering the price of a whiskey sample to more expensive tariffs for extensive events like hard-hat tours. Gift shops often sell expressions available only at the distillery.

Visit americanwhiskeytrail.com, scotch-whisky.org.uk, discus.org and irelandwhiskeytrail.com

—Jack Bettridge

Partagás

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Despite fleeing Cuba penniless, Ramón Cifuentes carried his love of tobacco with him. With determination that was only rivaled by his passion, he soon reinvented his most beloved brand, Partagás. To honor his relentless spirit, we're pleased to introduce Partagás Ramón y Ramón. Based on original heirloom seeds from his time, Ramón y Ramón is a fitting tribute to the man who made Partagás what it is today.

See the legend of the legend at partagas.com | [f](#) [t](#) [i](#)



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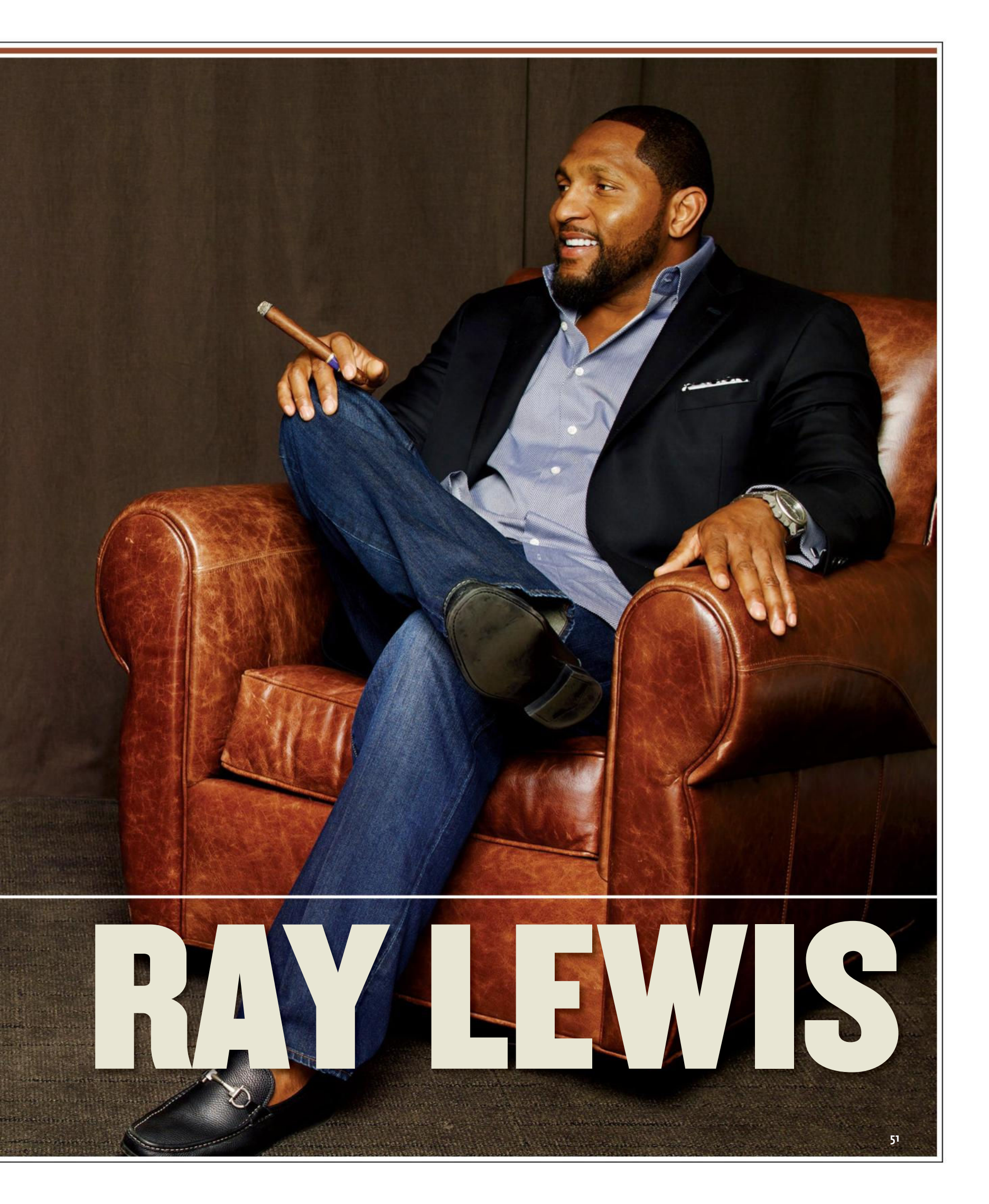
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AN INTERVIEW WITH

Marvin R. Shanken interviews the controversial and intense Ray Lewis, who overcame all odds to become one of football's greatest players

DAVID YELLEN



RAY LEWIS

Do you think you know Ray Lewis? You may know the player who ruled the NFL for 17 seasons with the Baltimore Ravens, a linebacker of immense strength and desire who learned the art of defense as a Miami Hurricane and always seemed to know where the ball was going. He led the Ravens to two Super Bowl victories, was named Super Bowl MVP in 2000, and was a key member of what many believe is the greatest defense of all time.

Or you may think you know the Ray Lewis who stood accused of a double homicide in Atlanta, a charge that was later dropped and a crime that he—and even the lead detective in the case, Ken Allen—says never should have been levied against him.

But you likely don't know where Lewis came from: born in poverty in Bartow, Florida, and abandoned at birth by his father, left behind without even a name and raised by his 15-year-old mother. And you probably don't know the abuse they suffered, punishment that drove him to strengthen his body and regard the physical challenges of football as nothing in comparison.

This summer, Lewis sat down with CIGAR AFICIONADO editor and publisher Marvin R. Shanken for a wide-ranging conversation over cigars to show the world the real man behind the one everyone thinks they know.

Shanken: I feel like you need to hear this. [Takes out his iPhone and presses play, showing Ray Lewis a video of a speech Lewis made at Harvard in 2012 that was recorded by NFL Productions.]

Lewis (voice on screen): "As a young child my momma had me at 15 years old. My father walked out on my mom and left me in the incubator with no name. I'm 36 years old. I spent my first Father's Day with my father at 33 years old. Then my mom was in some rough relationships, and so we would see these bruises and when we would see these black eyes on her face I would say, 'Mom, why do you keep going through this?' And a lot of people always look at me and they always say, 'Man, how did you become this great football player?' It wasn't football that drove me. It was making sure a man would never put his hands on my mom again, is what drove me."

Shanken: That's one of the most powerful things I've ever heard in my life.

Lewis: Ten years old, I made up my mind that last altercation we had was that. My mom would never be touched again.

Shanken: It's all hypothetical, but would Ray Lewis today, and would Ray Lewis the football player, be Ray Lewis who he became had it not been for your experience and relationship with your mom?

Lewis: No. Impossible. And I tell people all the time if there was anything to change I wouldn't change nothing. Because that drove me. I look at my kids, I look at athletes—there's a burn that has always been in the pit of my stomach.

Shanken: What was the high in your life?

Lewis: The high in my life has always been my mom. To see her endure. When I was 10 years old, I tugged on her dress and I said "One of

these days you're never going to have to work another day in your life." And I meant that. My junior year in high school, she takes all of her five kids and she moves us to Memphis, Tennessee. I end up running away for a few days, and she found me sitting on the floor. She knew I wanted to go back to Florida so bad. She gave me \$39 and said, "I think I'm making the biggest mistake of my life by sending you back." She handed me a book with \$20 worth of food stamps. She said, "That's all I got."

Shanken: And you went back to Florida by yourself?

Lewis: Yeah.

Shanken: And how old were you?

Lewis: Seventeen.

Shanken: Where did you live?

Lewis: Well, I shuffled around. I ended up staying with my grandmother because I could go to a certain school. The happiest moment of my life was when I called mom and I said, "I got a scholarship. College."

Shanken: What was the low?

Lewis: The day that my mom said she can't do anything more. My mom was in a very rough spot in life. She was broke. I said, "OK, pack up everybody and you guys come stay with me." Then I said, "Mom, I got to go. To the draft."

Shanken: Your signing bonus. What was it—\$1 million?

Lewis: \$1.2 million.

Shanken: Did you get it up front?

Lewis: Up front.

Shanken: Did that include your salary?

Lewis: Plus salary.

Shanken: So you could help your family.

Lewis: I had done everything in college that there was to do.



Ray Lewis (52) played for 17 seasons with the Baltimore Ravens, cementing a reputation for excellence and leadership on the field and in the locker room.

Shanken: You hear this a lot, where kids playing college football give up their senior year, or more, because they need to help their families. Is there something wrong with the system?

Lewis: Yeah, because you're asking kids to give up their life to pursue another life which does not pay financially.

Shanken: So how do college kids keep clean and handle the responsibilities of their own lives and their families' needs? Why doesn't the NCAA change the system so it works for everybody?

Lewis: I've been asking that question for over 20-plus years. Money. They don't want to share that. I'll give you an example: 2003 to 2010, I had the No. 1 selling jersey in the world, any sport. And I asked one of the reps one time, 'If you gave me \$5 off of each jersey that was sold, I don't need to be paid through a contract.' So who makes all the money? The league. In college who makes all the money? The school. But there's no game if you don't have athletes, so why aren't we paid?

Shanken: And why doesn't the NFL, with all the wealth and success it has, create or enforce a system with the NCAA so that kids can finish college?

Lewis: The NFL is the only sport that tells you the higher you go, the less we try to respect you. I beg to differ. I am greater than I will ever be now, then when I was playing. Why? Because now I do it for me. You put somebody next to a Hall-of-Famer, there's no comparison. You're wishing, you're hoping he makes it to that pedestal. That guy's already made it. Compare apples to oranges. I'm not going to put Odell Beckham in the same conversation I'm going to put Jerry Rice. Generals in the military, they're the highest paid. Why? Because they have the greatest experience. Hall-of-Famers should be the highest paid because they have the greatest experience. But it's the opposite in sports. It's the next new athlete. But I tell you, the day I walk into Canton, Lord willing, I think I'll give a totally different approach on the way the Hall of Fame should be looked at. You look at Earl

Campbell, you look at Jim Brown, you look at these guys who gave the league everything and now it says, "We're done with you now."

Shanken: It's business.

Lewis: It's business. But in every business, the higher you climb the ladder, the higher your paycheck. That never stops for a general.

Shanken: Let's go back to college. You were offered a scholarship to Florida State. You go in for a meeting and they say "You're going to play right behind—"

Lewis: Derrick Brooks [who played 14 seasons with Tampa Bay]. "And by the time you're at junior year you should be big enough to start."

Shanken: And what did you say?

Lewis: Thank you, but no thank you.

Shanken: And you walked out?

Lewis: I said, "How you know I'm not better than Derrick Brooks right now?" And I walked



Lewis gets a hug on draft day from grandmother Elise as he speaks to his new team, the Ravens.

out. I got back to school and I saw my high school coach who was six-foot-five fall onto his knees. He said “You messed up your future!”

Shanken: A full scholarship—

Lewis: A full scholarship to Florida State. [Laughs]

Shanken: So it says in your book that you then went through the next few months with no offers. You weren’t going to college!

Lewis: I wasn’t going to college. We started looking at alternate routes. Dennis Erickson and Art Kehoe [of the Miami Hurricanes] saw me playing my last high school game at Kathleen Stadium. They were recruiting a player by the name of Jammi German from Fort

Meyers, who was the No. 1 player in the nation at the time. We played them in the last round of the playoffs. I had a game so freakin’ ridiculous it was stupid. Stats wise, number wise. Four days before signing day, Dennis Erickson called. The guy that had that last scholarship blew out his knee and they said, “We have one more scholarship, and we’re going to offer it to you.”

Shanken: Do you know who that guy was?

Lewis: No.

Shanken: You should find out and send him a Christmas card, because it’s quite possible that your response to Florida State could have cost you your career.

Lewis: Possibly. Could have.

Shanken: And now you’re a freshman.

Lewis: Yeah, and not even in the media guide. We’re playing Virginia Tech, second game of the year. [Starter] Robert Bass goes down. Instead of Randy Shannon screaming “James Burgess, get in,” he says, “I want Ray Lewis.”

Shanken: You were shocked.

Lewis: I was shocked. I just went out and did what I did.

Shanken: So that game, how many tackles?

Lewis: I ended up with 14 tackles—I didn’t play until the second half.

Shanken: Which is humongous.

Lewis: The Colorado game, the following week, on ABC, I had, what, 19 tackles, a sack, four pass breakups. The reporter asked me, “How good do you think you could be?” And I said, “Honestly, before I leave here, I may be the greatest Hurricane ever to walk up out of the University of Miami.” I’ll never forget the calls I got. But one of the calls was from Michael Irvin, and Mike called me and he said, “Damn it, that’s what we need. We got your back.”

Shanken: All right so, you decided to go in the NFL draft after your third season, and who did you want to play for?

Lewis: The Miami Dolphins. It was the perfect fit. They had the 20th pick, [former Hurricanes coach] Jimmy Johnson was the head coach at the time, and all of the ducks were in row. And they take this big kid, defensive tackle, out of Baylor, and I look at the TV and I’m saying, “Are you serious?” And so when I didn’t go to the Dolphins, I’m like OK, so I’m going 27. Green Bay had that pick. I’m on the phone with Green Bay. And the 26th pick comes up and the phone rings. The voice says “Ray Lewis this is Ozzie Newsome [General Manager of the Baltimore Ravens]. We’re about to draft you.” And I’m like, “With who?” He was like, “With Baltimore.” Baltimore? Baltimore don’t have a team [laughs]. And then he starts breaking it down: they’re the old Cleveland Browns, moving to Baltimore. No name, no face, no logo, no identity [laughs]. We were 4-12, we were 6-10...

Shanken: So when was the first positive year?

Lewis: ’99.

Shanken: Let’s talk about the 2000 season.

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Lewis rejected a scholarship to Florida State, endangering his college career, but an injury to another player opened a spot for him with the Miami Hurricanes, where he played three standout seasons (top and middle photos). Lewis maintains a close relationship with the team to this day, and is shown with current head coach Mark Richt (bottom) during a recent visit to the University.

Lewis: It was the most dominant team defense I've ever been on in my life. We weren't talking about first downs, we was talking about one yard. One yard.

Shanken: And now if I'm not mistaken, your team allowed the least amount of yards—

Lewis: In the history of the game. [Baltimore allowed 970 rushing yards, the best ever in a 16-game season.]

Shanken: And points—

Lewis: In the history of the game. [The Ravens gave up 165 points that year, better than any other team in a 16-game season.]

Shanken: And you won a big game at the end, what's that game called?

Lewis: Super Bowl.

Shanken: And who was the MVP?

Lewis: I was the MVP of that game.

Shanken: Now what was that like?

Lewis: I never shied away from telling people what I was coming into this business to do. And that was to be the greatest to ever put on a pair of cleats, regardless of position. That year, there was one person in the way of us getting to Tampa. His name was Eddie George. He was the most physical thing you've ever seen run a football.

Shanken: What happened to Eddie George?

Lewis: One play. It was a delayed screen. I watched that screen [on film] over 200 times, plus. McNair, rest in peace, McNair comes out in the game and I look to the left, I say, oh my gosh—this has got to be this play. I said, "I promise you I'm going to knock him out." I took off. By the time the ball touched Eddie's hands, soon as it touched him, I caught Eddie on what a linebacker calls the sweet spot. [Lewis points to the side of his head.] Everything that I had been through in life I gave to that hit. And I looked at the sideline, Tennessee's side, I said: "Come get him. Y'all ride over." Because he was that dude. The year before he had touched the ball 403 times, broken Earl Campbell's record.

Shanken: He was in your way.

Lewis: He was in my way. The only way Baltimore could be really recognized was that guy had to be slowed down.

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"I wanted to produce something I remembered. I wanted to go back to my childhood. I wanted to go back to the happiest moments of my life. I wanted my grandfather to be proud of me. I wanted my father to be proud of me and my children to someday be proud of me. It was something I had to do."

Arturo Fuente

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Shanken: So you won the Super Bowl, and then life went on, and you had some good seasons, some bad seasons, and then the second Super Bowl.

Lewis: '12.

Shanken: Before the 2012 season starts, did you have it in your mind that you were going to retire at the end of the year?

Lewis: There were two people that knew; my oldest two kids.

Shanken: Nobody on the Ravens. And obviously your dream was to go out on top.

Lewis: Yeah.

Shanken: Did you think before the season began you had the team to go all the way?

Lewis: Yeah. Because 2011, we let one go with New England [in the] AFC championship. It was personal, because I wanted to go back to New England to win that ring. I knew it was going to have to go through New England.

October 7, we're playing against the Cowboys, Romo gets ready to throw a pass, I go up to block it, and I pop my triceps from the bone.

Shanken: And the team doctor said, "You're done."

Lewis: She's crying. She said, "Nobody's ever come back from a triceps tear, Ray." Wednesday I had surgery. Ten days after I was riding my bike, but I couldn't grip it. And I sat on my bike and I said "Grip the freakin' handlebars and stop freakin' crying." And I gripped the handlebars. I had a team of nine different doctors that I went around, every day for ten weeks. I came back [after] 10 weeks. I was 80 to 85 [percent]. And I told my coach I need to speak to the team [before the playoffs]. It was all about life. It was all about respecting coaches. It was all about why I don't curse in front of coaches, why I respect being on time, and why I never miss practices. And in the last 30 seconds I said, "This is my last ride." That's when I announced my retirement, told them I was done.

Shanken: What happened in that Super Bowl?

Lewis: [Ravens Defensive Coordinator] Dean Pees said, "Your last ride, how you want to go out?" I said, "We're running cover zeros [man-to-man coverage], all the way—Every damn play." He said, "Why?" I said, "Because Kaepernick can't beat us throwing." Fourth down came and I sat there lined up and I went to every guy. I said, "Give me one play. Nobody got to be no hero. Just give me one play of everybody doing their job and I can live the rest of my life as a champion." And I saw that ball go over my head and I said, "Every damn pain I've ever felt." Muhammad Ali had one of the greatest quotes ever: "I hated every day of training but if it meant living my life as a champion, the rest of my life, I'd do it all over again." When that ball went over my head, man, I said, "You're a champion for the rest of your life." I don't believe we would have won the Super Bowl if I didn't get hurt.

Shanken: You played your whole career for one team. Any regrets?



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RAY LEWIS AND THE MEN WHO COACHED HIM

In his 17 years with the Ravens, Lewis played for many coaches. We asked him to reflect on each.

BRIAN BILLICK

Head coach, Baltimore Ravens, 1999–2007

“Billick quickly became the coach that would have our back no matter what it was,” says Lewis. “He was genius to map out our road to Super Bowl XXXV day-by-day.”

BRIAN BILICK ON RAY LEWIS

“Ray Lewis is the most dominant defender of his era. Ray was unique in that he had superior athleticism, intelligence and tenacity. But his willingness to learn, even as a perennial All-Pro who really had nothing left to prove, is what set him apart.”

JOHN HARBAUGH

Head coach, Baltimore Ravens, 2008–present

“He thought I had too much power—which I did,” says Lewis. “Once he learned that it wasn’t about me he got me.”

DEAN PEES

Defensive coordinator, Baltimore Ravens, 2012–present

Linebackers coach, Baltimore Ravens, 2010–2011

“There’s not a better mind,” says Lewis.

MIKE SINGLETARY

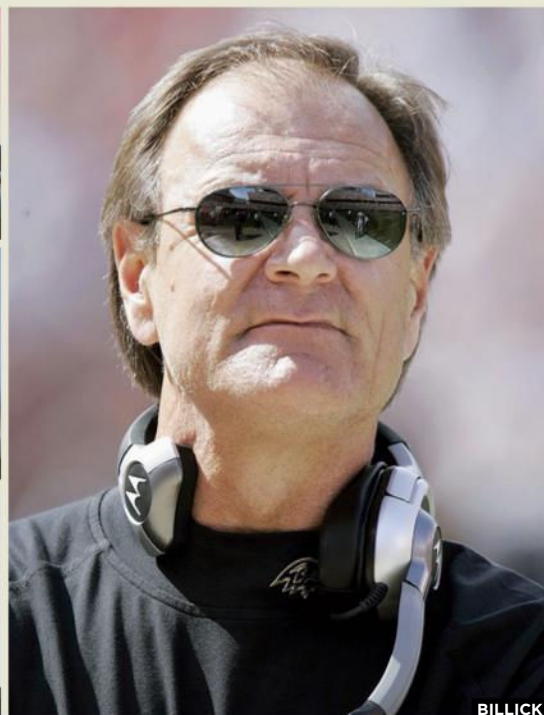
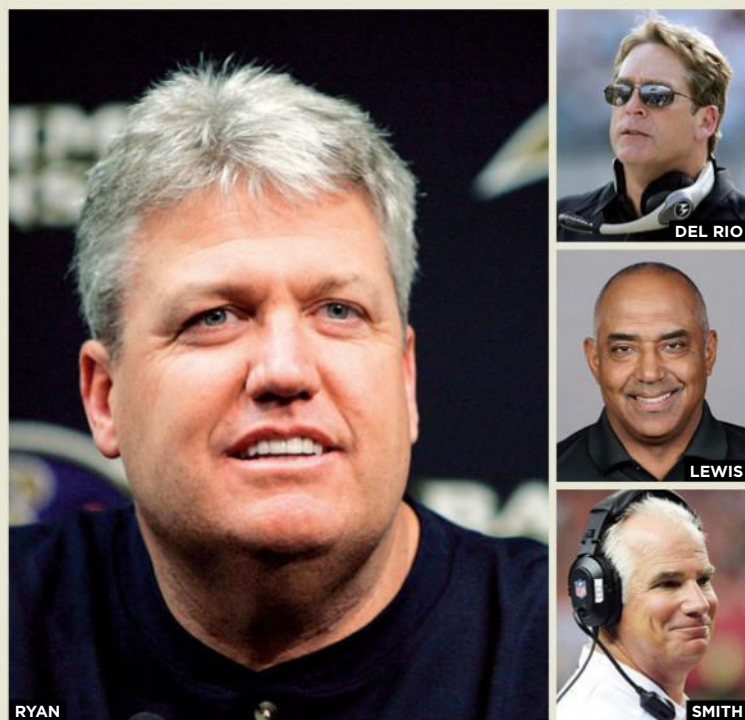
Defensive assistant, L.A. Rams

Linebackers coach, Baltimore Ravens, 2003–2004

Member of Pro Football Hall of Fame

Super Bowl XX Champion

“I admired him at 10 years old,” says Lewis. “I spent more time with him teaching me how to be a man than on the game. I would meet him every Monday, pull out a Bible, go through a verse.”



REX RYAN

Head coach, Buffalo Bills

Defensive coordinator, Baltimore Ravens, 2005–2008

Defensive line coach, Baltimore Ravens 1999–2004

“The kind of guy you would die for,” Lewis says. “Some people become a father figure from day one. And that’s who he is.”

REX RYAN ON RAY LEWIS

“I would rank Ray Lewis as possibly the best middle linebacker in the history of the NFL—him and Dick Butkus.... When you look at Ray among defensive players of his time, he is right there with Lawrence Taylor, Reggie White, Bruce Smith and Deion Sanders.”

JACK DEL RIO

Head coach, Oakland Raiders

Linebackers coach, Baltimore Ravens, 1999–2001

“My favorite,” says Lewis. “Jack caught me early, so he molded the professional side of me.”

MARVIN LEWIS

Head coach, Cincinnati Bengals

Defensive coordinator, Baltimore Ravens, 1996–2001

“The mastermind to my science of the game.”

MIKE SMITH

Defensive coordinator, Tampa Bay Buccaneers

Linebackers coach, Baltimore Ravens, 2002

Defensive assistant, 1999–2001

“Mike Smith was with me when I was young,” says Lewis. “We used to learn the ins and outs of the whole business.”

BILICK: DAVID MAXWELL/GETTY IMAGES; HARBAUGH: THEARON W. HENDERSON/GETTY IMAGES; PEES: NICK CAMMETT/DIAMOND IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES; SINGLETARY: AP PHOTO/NFL PHOTOS; RYAN: AP PHOTO/ROB CARR; DEL RIO: DOUG BENC/GETTY IMAGES; LEWIS: AP PHOTO; SMITH: SCOTT CUNNINGHAM/GETTY IMAGES



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RAY LEWIS AND CIGARS

Ray Lewis enjoys a cigar late each night, when he sits down to write. But prior to about 10 years ago, he had never smoked. His grandfather on his mother's side, who he called Papa, always had a cigar in his mouth. When Lewis asked him why, he told the young Lewis: "The day you figure out why I keep a cigar in my mouth is the day you figure out manhood." He died before he could reveal the secret behind his saying. Lewis went over a friend's house in 2005, a few years after his Papa died, and the man handed him a cigar, a Padrón. Lewis initially refused, then took the cigar and lit the smoke. "I took three puffs," says Lewis. "Tears started rolling down my eyes, my face...I started reflecting on everything that I had done for my grandfather and I said, 'Now I know what manhood is.' And cigars for me, everyday from that moment, became my getaway, became an isolated moment that every man needs."

Recently Lewis paired up with cigarmaker Rocky Patel to make his own cigar, a one-sized brand called Ray Lewis Legends 52 by Rocky Patel. The box has photos of Lewis on the inner

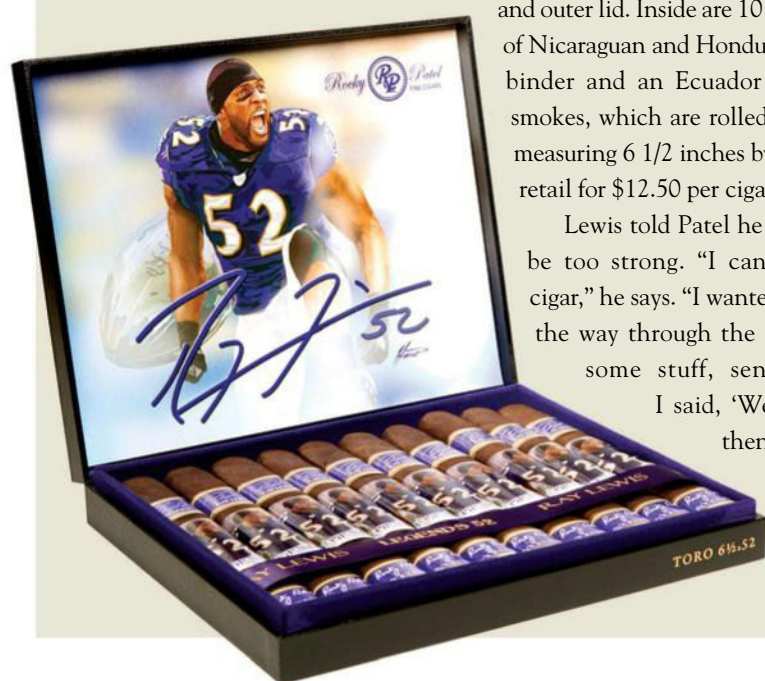
and outer lid. Inside are 10 cigars made from a blend of Nicaraguan and Honduran fillers, a Costa Rican binder and an Ecuador Habano wrapper. The smokes, which are rolled in Honduras, are Toros measuring 6 1/2 inches by 52 ring gauge, and they retail for \$12.50 per cigar.

Lewis told Patel he didn't want the cigar to be too strong. "I can't smoke a full-bodied cigar," he says. "I wanted a nice smooth cigar all the way through the end. So he played with some stuff, sent me a few options.

I said, 'We're almost there.' And then he sent me the last one.

I said—'That's it. That's the cigar.'"

—David Savona



Lewis: None.

Shanken: Any other team you would've wanted to play for?

Lewis: Not one. I would never put on another jersey. Never.

Shanken: The coaches all said it was your team.

Lewis: It was.

Shanken: You were the leader.

Lewis: That credit goes to Ozzie Newsome. Ozzie figured that out in '98, '99. He said, "How involved do you want to be with this team?" I said, "I want to know everything out there."

Shanken: All in.

Lewis: All in. [Head coach Brian] Billick

simply said, "What do we need to win?" I said, "Give me ten points.... Give me seven early—game over." We went 52 straight games without seeing a 100-yard rusher—52 straight games. We went through the entire playoffs in 2000, we gave up one touchdown, Eddie George on the opening drive in Adelphia Coliseum. Denver didn't score. Tennessee scored once. We go to the black hole [the Oakland Raiders' home field] with Rich Gannon, Jerry Rice, Tim Brown, Tyrone Wheatley, and the No. 1 offense in the game. They didn't score, 13-3. We get to the Super Bowl. I said, "What defense has ever allowed no touchdowns?" They said, "It's never been done." I said, "Until today. They won't score." [The Ravens beat the Giants 34-7, with New York's only points coming on a kickoff return, a play not charged against the defense.]

Shanken: Are you still connected with the Ravens?

Lewis: I always will be.

Shanken: Something happened that I'm not even sure you want me to bring up. Do you want to talk about that?

Lewis: I told you, every moment in life is intentional. What I had to go through individually, as a person, not only prepared me for a journey that I couldn't predict, but it prepared me to go through one of the most controversial seasons of my life.

Shanken: OK, so we're at a point where we come to what was the most compelling part of your life, in terms of challenge. You went out with a bunch of guys, you're wearing a fur coat, you're hanging around with some bad dudes. Tell me about that night.

Lewis: Yeah. I tell my sons this all the time, I'm never concerned about you, I'm concerned about the people and the company you keep. Twenty-four years old and my heart is the reason why I was in trouble, and got in that trouble because I wasn't man enough to tell the wrong people, "You're not bad people, you're just not going where I'm going. So that means me and you really don't agree." Am I man enough to say that now? Absolutely. Was I man enough at 24? Absolutely not. So I leave this club and this chaos breaks out and my life changed in 30 seconds. Immediately.

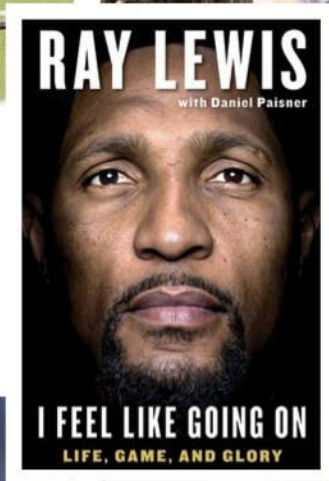
Shanken: Ray Lewis was immature.

Lewis: Very immature.

Shanken: And Ray Lewis was all about Ray Lewis.

Lewis: Yeah. And you know what, to frame that a little better, I was about trying to make a lot of people happy. I was paying rent for people, I was paying kids' tuitions. But it wasn't the right people.

Shanken: So you go back to your hotel. Apparently you were in a limo with a bunch of people, some of them you didn't even know, and there are gunshots that actually hit the car. You got a flat tire and you went back to your hotel and on TV you see that two guys have been murdered. And according to published articles you told the guys you were with not to say a word. So then the police come. And they arrest you.



Football has been very good to Lewis. From top left, with Ravens owner Steve Bisciotti in 2008; bringing home the Lombardi Trophy after his final game; at work as an NFL analyst in 2014; staring down the opposition during a game in 1996 and (center) his 2015 life story, *I Feel Like Going On*.





In 2000, Ray Lewis found himself accused of homicide. Far left, at his first court appearance. At left, facing his accuser, DA Paul Howard, who later spoke to the press (bottom left).

Lewis pleaded not guilty and today contends he not only didn't stab the men, but he didn't fight them at all. "Never in the fight," he said during his interview with CIGAR AFICIONADO editor and publisher Marvin R. Shanken. Ken Allen, who was the lead detective in the case, told CIGAR AFICIONADO in a phone interview that he believes Lewis was "involved in the fight," but that he should never have been charged with homicide. "I don't think Ray Lewis murdered anybody."

A September 2000 article in *Atlanta* magazine described the trial. The district attorney "exaggerated his evidence and made promises to the jury that he couldn't keep," the article states. Witness after witness failed to bolster the prosecution's case, and after two weeks of trial the murder charges against Lewis were dropped. He pleaded guilty to the misdemeanor charge of obstruction of justice. He served a one-year probation and was fined \$250,000 by the NFL. "I was found guilty of obstruction of justice because I simply said to the cop, 'I don't know everybody that was in the limo,'" Lewis said in the interview with Shanken.

Two other men who were with him that night, Reginald Oakley and Joseph Sweeting, were found not guilty of murder.

Despite his acquittal of murder charges, Lewis realizes there are those who still look upon him differently after the event in Atlanta in January 2000. "I would have to live under these new shadows," he wrote in his book, "for the rest of my life."

—David Savona

THE ARREST IN ATLANTA

Super Bowl XXXIV provided as dramatic a finish as could be hoped for as the St. Louis Rams narrowly avoided overtime by stopping the surging Tennessee Titans on the one-yard line in the final moments of a game played in Atlanta on January 30, 2000. But it was events that occurred less than 10 miles away, early the following morning that would cast a pallor on the otherwise brilliant career of the promising young Baltimore Ravens linebacker Ray Lewis.

Lewis wasn't on the field that night, but had been in the city appearing at a series of events. According to his own account in his book, *I Feel Like Going On*, he watched the game on television during a friend's party and later went to the Cobalt Lounge in Atlanta's Buckhead neighborhood for a

postgame party. Trouble ensued when Lewis, who was 24 at the time, left the club with a large group in the morning hours of January 31, headed for a limousine.

Lewis and his group ("Can't say how many we were," he wrote in the book) began to enter the limo. A group of men walked up to them. A fight broke out. As the car containing Lewis and many others pulled away, shots were fired at the vehicle, hitting the trunk and side panels and deflating a tire, according to the book. No one in the vehicle was hit by the gunfire.

Back near the club, Richard Lollar and Jacinth Baker were dead of stab wounds.

Police arrested Lewis, and the district attorney, Paul Howard, charged him with double homicide. He spent 15 days in jail.

should have been charged with murder. "I don't think Ray Lewis murdered anybody," he said.

Lewis: They were able to get a judge to sign an indictment in less than 24 hours on a weekend. And the first guy walked up to me and said, "You will never be charged or indicted with this charge." I said, "You're charging me for what?" I was found guilty of obstruction of justice because I simply said to the cop, "I don't know everybody that was in the limo." That's

what they charged me with. That's what I was guilty of. The prosecutors, [District Attorney] Paul Howard and [Assistant District Attorney] Clint Rucker, both of those guys I looked in the eye and I said, "You're going to have to see me one day again because you know you don't have enough on me." One of them looked at me dead smack in my face and said, "We know you didn't do it, but you're going to take the fall."

And then, a day or two later, they charge you with murder.

Lewis: Double murder.

Shanken: Double murder. And you weren't there.

Lewis: Never in the fight.

Shanken: Now according to the detective, Ken Allen, who we spoke to, he said you never



“EVERY MOMENT IN LIFE IS INTENTIONAL. WHAT I HAD TO GO THROUGH INDIVIDUALLY NOT ONLY PREPARED ME FOR A JOURNEY THAT I COULDN’T PREDICT, BUT IT PREPARED ME TO GO THROUGH ONE OF THE MOST CONTROVERSIAL SEASONS OF MY LIFE.”
—RAY LEWIS



Shanken: Do you have any sense of what motivated this guy to come after Ray Lewis?

Lewis: Yeah. Cowards exist at every level. At every level.

Shanken: Now, in your book, you talk about, you’re in jail for 10 days—

Lewis: Fifteen.

Shanken: OK. You don’t go into it, but you say you were tortured. The detective said there’s no way he was tortured, he’s making it up, he was treated wonderfully. So, tell me how they tortured you?

Lewis: For like the first seven, eight days I never ate anything outside of orange halves.

Shanken: They weren’t giving you any food?

Lewis: If you saw the moldy baloney and things that they were trying to . . . I was not an animal. And I was not going to succumb to that. So every day [my friend] would bring me a bunch of orange halves. He snuck them in for me.

Shanken: Did they physically—

Lewis: They know everything that happened to me. I was a museum piece for them. I was this “thing” that brought attention to them.

Shanken: But how did they torture you?

Lewis: Let me say this, what happened to me, those 15 days, I will live for the rest of my life.

And I’m OK now with that.

Shanken: So horrendous that you can’t speak of it.

Lewis: I never will. Never.

Shanken: Did they say to you, if you want to get out of jail you must agree to guilt of a lesser crime?

Lewis: Of obstruction of justice.

Shanken: Otherwise you can’t get out of jail?

Lewis: Yes.

Shanken: That’s what I read between the lines.

Lewis: It was exactly what they did.

Shanken: So you had no choice—sign the lesser plea agreement or stay in jail?

Lewis: The judge brought us in the back room. What was never shared, and this is what’s crazy to me, it’s that they have facts. Facts! They had tape recordings of police officers interviewing my driver saying, “Don’t you see Ray Lewis on that . . . Don’t you see him in that fight? If you don’t see him we’re charging you with double murder.” There are factual tapes of that! Let me tell you something, it’s so much about Atlanta, about what those folks did, that was never told to the public. So when you talk about torture, to play with someone’s life? I sat there in court and my lawyer says to me, “Man, I think we got a tape, we got a confession from this girl, we’re going to get you clear out of this.” I said, “Well

tell the judge right now. What’re we waiting on?” And then we get into court and we go into the chambers and they tell me, “Don’t worry you can get out. This is the plea.”

Shanken: And by you admitting to that, which you needed to get out, you could not come back and sue the city.

Lewis: I could not come back and sue the damn city. Remember this, the DA Paul Howard [and] Clint Rucker walked in, sitting there with my lawyers, clearly, I’m sitting right here and he says, “We have nothing on him.” So why am I here? Because you went on national TV and said without a shadow of a doubt we can prove that Ray Lewis stabbed and killed two men. That man said that out of his own mouth and they never had one piece of evidence that I was ever in a fight and had testimonies of at least 12 people that clearly put me totally opposite of the altercation. People don’t understand how cruel the world really is.

Shanken: You came from a poor family, your mother had you when she was 15, you had four brothers and sisters. No money. She had three jobs. You never got into drugs or other things, you were a God-fearing man, you practiced religion your whole life. And yet, in casual conversations, and you don’t want to hear it, but it’s true, and you know it’s true, when I speak to people about Ray Lewis, who don’t necessarily follow football, they say to me, “Oh that’s the guy that

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ESCAPE TO PARADISE



Lewis at the bar in New York's Grand Havana Room, and (right) with Shanken in the offices of CIGAR AFICIONADO magazine.

killed two people in Atlanta.”

Lewis: Absolutely.

Shanken: How do you feel about Paul Howard, the DA that tried to destroy your life?

Lewis: I forgave him. Because my duty as a child of God is to forgive and keep moving. I pray for them. When I saw what was happening and when I saw what happened, I gave up trying to be liked. And with those guys, their names are in my Bibles, that hopefully God blesses them.

Shanken: That is a very generous thought. Sometimes we wonder if God is so good and so powerful, why do so many bad things happen? Why are there wars? Why are there murders? Why is there disease and so on and so forth? So jumping to another place. You're black, African-American, the detective and the mayor of Atlanta were black and you're from Baltimore. I'm white. Look what happened in

Baltimore with Freddie Gray. I can understand prejudice. I can understand what happened to Freddie Gray and the city, whether the police were guilty or innocent almost doesn't matter, but the thing that doesn't equate in Atlanta is that they were black and they were doing this to another black man. But how involved did you get in your city during this time of national crisis, with Freddie Gray?

Lewis: I'm on the ground now. I won't stop. There are things I have coming now that will help change what's going on in Baltimore. Last year we broke a 40-year-old record, since 1942 we had never had as many homicides in Baltimore. Right now we're at 127 and we're just in the month of June. Chicago....

Shanken: Chicago is off the map.

Lewis: ...It's even worse. Miami, it's even worse. There's a war that Jim Brown, Ali, that all those guys passed down to me. Why? Because I think

everybody in the streets, everybody knows who I'm for, what I'm for and what I stand for. I love these conversations that we're having now, I hold these conversations at my house to enlighten people on life. Marv, I do more for people in broken neighborhoods than probably anybody you'll ever know. And you won't find one camera.

Shanken: It seems like mayors, governments, aren't doing enough, and in some cases it appears they're not even trying to help the kids in the street, Chicago in particular. To prevent them from killing each other. Why is that?

Lewis: Because they don't know what it feels like. They don't walk in the streets. You know what America has told us? Make it out and don't go back. That's what we've been told. Build the big houses, go away. Get far away from all that other stuff because there's too much going on. I'm the opposite. I'm not leaving. It'll never stop. It'll never stop for me because my fight is the same fight Jim Brown had.

Shanken: In virtually every city . . .

Lewis: Every city, it looks exactly the same.





Lewis with his two Super Bowl rings, and the ring for being named MVP in Super Bowl XXXV.

“I NEVER SHIED AWAY FROM TELLING PEOPLE WHAT I WAS COMING INTO THIS BUSINESS TO DO. AND THAT WAS TO BE THE GREATEST TO EVER PUT ON A PAIR OF CLEATS, REGARDLESS OF POSITION.”—RAY LEWIS

Lack of development. No produce. Drugs on every corner. Liquor stores on every corner. No hope.

Shanken: Broken families.

Lewis: Disturbed families.

Shanken: Families without fathers. You know it better than anybody.

Lewis: Anybody. And most don't make it out. Most don't make it out.

Shanken: And quite often the children are born

to a young mother who can't see how to live a day, let alone take care of a child with no help.

Lewis: No help. And every community looks exactly the same. The day we took prayer out of schools, everything changed.

Shanken: What's your relationship with your father like now?

Lewis: My father now? He's the craziest man I've ever met in my life.

Shanken: Are you close?

Lewis: Yeah, I gave up everything . . .

Shanken: Did he ever explain to you why he left you?

Lewis: The first time I got in the car with him, we rode six hours from one part of North Carolina to another part of North Carolina and I never said a word. I got in the car, passenger side. He told me everything, why he wasn't there. Women, drugs, alcohol, all this stuff, career, all this. I never said a word. We pull up to a green house in a small little part of North Carolina. And we walk in the house and I walk in the door and I meet my grandfather. And I'm like, "Oh my gosh."

Shanken: This is your other grandfather?

Lewis: This is my daddy's father, who I had never met.

Shanken: And you're 33 at the time?

Lewis: 33. And we walk in the house and I just hear my father say to his dad, "Why did you leave me?" And I laid on the floor and I said, "This is way too much."

Shanken: So your father did to you—

Lewis: What his father did to him. We got back in the car, he said, "You got what you needed?" I said, "Better yet, I got what I wanted." Which was, I'll never leave my kids. Ever. Ever. And that day, I told him, I said, "The curse will be broken." Y'all wasn't there? That's cool. But there's not one birthday, one birth, one graduation, one dance recital, one football game—That was my commitment to my family. What my kids will never understand was I was determined to break these curses, of listening to these fathers make all these excuses of why I could not be there. I said, "Dad, as of this day, all I'm asking you to do, is don't ask me for nothing, just be my father. That's all I need from you. I don't need nothing from you. Nothing. My sisters, my family, I have made sure that we're OK, so all I need you to do is be a father." So that's the thing. Sometimes I go in and out with him, because me being 41-years-old, me having my own kids. But I always wanted to introduce my kids to the whole family. I wanted my kids to know their grandfather. ❖

To view videos of the conversation between Lewis and Shanken, visit www.cigaraficionado.com



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NFL

PREVIEW

BY DANNY SHERIDAN

The NFL's arduous battle of the gridiron will soon begin, and our football expert analyzes the strengths and weaknesses of each team to predict who will prevail as champion

AL BELLO/GETTY IMAGES

Dynamic New York Giant Odell Beckham Jr. thrilled football fans last year with his high-flying exploits, like this touchdown catch against Washington.

AFC EAST

Patriot powerhouse tight end Rob Gronkowski (left) is expected to help Tom Brady deliver New England yet another AFC East division title in 2016, while Brandon Marshall (bottom right) and the New York Jets are seeking relief from a five-year playoff drought.



1 ► NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS

The us-against-the-world mentality that carried the 12-4 Patriots to their seventh straight division title returns with ageless QB Tom Brady facing an overly harsh four-game Deflategate suspension he evaded a year ago. Tom Terrific fashioned his best season in four years (4,770 yards, 36 TDs) only to fall short against Peyton Manning in the AFC Championship game. Party animal TE Rob Gronkowski (1,176 yards, 11 TDs) was practically unstoppable. Bill Belichick, who has Jimmy Garoppolo in reserve but could probably win with Justin Bieber at quarterback, signed ex-Bear TE Martellus Bennett to pair with Gronk and expects RB Dion Lewis and WR Julian Edelman to return from injuries. Never count the four-ring Kraft family out. Close but no cigar doesn't cut it in Kraftborough.

2 ► BUFFALO BILLS

Rex Ryan's bluster couldn't end a 16-year playoff drought following an 8-8 finish. Tyrod Taylor went 8-6 (3,035 yards, 20 TDs, 99.4 QBR) and became the club's first Pro Bowl QB since Drew Bledsoe in 2002. His six interceptions were a league low for QBs with 10-plus starts. Taylor clicked with WR Sammy Watkins (60 catches, 1,047 yards, 9 TDs), who will be hampered early (foot). RB LeSean McCoy (895 yards) powered the NFL's leading rushing attack. Ryan believes hiring big-as-a-buffalo twin brother Rob—the chicken wings at Duff's are a prohibitive underdog—can fix an undisciplined defense that had 21 sacks, second lowest in the league. Rex introduced Donald Trump at an off-season rally, perhaps because he's been put on notice to make the Bills great again.

3 ► NEW YORK JETS

Rookie coach Todd Bowles made Jet fans forget Ryan until a disastrous loss in Buffalo that left Gang Green 10-6 and out of the playoffs for the fifth straight year. QB Ryan Fitzpatrick (3,905 yards, 31 TDs) clicked with Brandon Marshall (109 receptions, 1,502 yards), the first receiver with 1,000-yard seasons for four different teams. WR Eric Decker (80 grabs, 1,027 yards, 12 TDs) gave the club its best duo since Keyshawn Johnson and Wayne Chrebet. The Jets lost Chris Ivory to Jacksonville but added RB Matt Forte. The defense was stout against the run, although 31-year-old CB Darrelle Revis slipped. "I think we can get to the Super Bowl," says Decker. Joe Namath better inform him the Jets haven't been there since Tom Coughlin was 22 years old.

4 ► MIAMI DOLPHINS

Adam Gase, the Dolphins' 10th head coach since 1995, inherits a 6-10 team that hasn't had a winning season in seven years. He may look like Bernie Sanders by the election. QB Ryan Tannehill has been sacked 184 times since 2012. The Dolphins made DT Ndamukong Suh the highest-paid lineman in the NFL in 2015, but he wasn't a game changer. WR Jarvis Landry played like an All-Pro (110 receptions, 1,157 yards) but more is expected from WR DeVante Parker. Big Fish Mike Tannenbaum brought in ex-Bills DE Mario Williams and traded for LB Kiko Alonso to resuscitate a 31st-ranked run defense. NFL analyst Rich Gannon labeled Miami "a dysfunctional franchise," unlike Prime 112 in South Beach.



LEFT: AARON M. SPRECHER VIA AP; RIGHT: JIM MCISAAC/GETTY IMAGES

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AFC NORTH

The John Wayne of quarterbacks, Big Ben Roethlisberger (left), threw for career numbers last season and should lead his team to an AFC North crown once again. The long-struggling Cleveland Browns however (bottom right) will finish in the basement of the division.



1 ► PITTSBURGH STEELERS

Big Ben Roethlisberger, the John Wayne of quarterbacks, missed nearly a month with a bad ankle yet led the NFL with a career-high 328.2 passing yards per game and beat the Bengals in the playoffs. He has the best WR in Antonio Brown (136 receptions, 1,834 yards, 10 TDs) primed to Dance With the Stars again. WR Markus Wheaton added 749 yards but the Steelers will miss WR Martavis Bryant (765 yards) who was suspended for the season. RB DeAngelo Williams (907 yards) was a godsend after RB Le'Veon Bell tore his MCL in November. Ladarius Green should be an upgrade at TE over retired Heath Miller. The Steel Curtain, inspired by 37-year-old LB James Harrison, will have those Terrible Towels waving.

2 ► CINCINNATI BENGALS

The Bengals (12-4) have reached the postseason six of the last seven seasons, yet haven't won a playoff game since 1990. The natives are growing restless with coach for life Marvin Lewis. QB Andy Dalton, who missed the playoffs because of a fractured thumb, will be ready for week one. He had his best season (3,250 yards, 25 TDs, 106.2 rating) throwing to WRs A.J. Green (86 catches, 1,297 yards) and Marvin Jones (65 receptions, 816 yards) and TE Tyler Eifert (52 grabs, 615 yards, 13 TDs). But Jones left for Detroit, Mohamed Sanu went to Atlanta and QB guru Hue Jackson is now coaching the Browns, which is akin to Trump leaving Melania for Carly Fiorina. Or Hillary. RBs Jeremy Hill (794 yards) and Giovani Bernard (730 yards) fueled the ground game. Volatile linebacker Vontaze Burfict (three-game suspension) will be missed in September.

3 ► BALTIMORE RAVENS

A rash of injuries to key players—QB Joe Flacco, WR Steve Smith, OLB Terrell Suggs and RB Justin Forsett—sabotaged the Ravens, whose 5-11 record was their worst since 2007. Flacco needs better playmakers. Breshad Perriman, 2015 No. 1 draft, missed the entire season. Ex-Viking WR Mike Wallace hopes to revive his career as a deep threat. No. 4 draft Louisiana Tech RB Kenneth Dixon, who scored 87 TDs (second in NCAA history) could push Forsett. Former Chargers FS Eric Weddle adds leadership to the secondary. GM Ozzie Newsome loaded up on pass rushers in the draft to help thirtysomethings Suggs and Elvis Dumervil. John Harbaugh is the only NFL head coach to win a playoff game in each of his first five seasons. Quoth the Ravens coach: Nevermore.

4 ► CLEVELAND BROWNS

The Bad News Browns have had six coaches since 2008 and eight straight losing seasons since 2007. There are almost as many Mistakes by the Lake as Bill Cosby accusers. Perhaps QB Robert Griffin (RG III) can be the anti-Manziel for new coach Hue Jackson. The overhauled front office's emphasis on analytics resulted in the drafting of five WRs, with No. 1 draft Corey Coleman expected to take the pressure off TE Gary Barnidge (79 catches, 1,043 yards) and replace WR Travis Benjamin (68 grabs for 966 yards). Free agency cost the Browns C Alex Mack and RT Mitchell Schwartz, but at least RGIII has experience running for his life. If Trump wants to build a wall, he should build it in front of FirstEnergy Stadium.



LEFT: JOE ROBBINS/GETTY IMAGES; RIGHT: JASON MILLER/GETTY IMAGES



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AFC SOUTH

Blake Bortles (right) had a solid year in 2015, but his Jacksonville Jaguars face tough competition in the AFC South. The Houston Texans have a new quarterback in Brock Osweiler, formerly with Denver, and Andrew Luck will be back from injury to lead the Colts.

1 ► INDIANAPOLIS COLTS

Kidney and shoulder injuries cut short \$140 million man Andrew Luck's season and the Colts' (8-8) designs on a ring. Front office friction between GM Ryan Grigson and Coach Chuck Pagano hardly helped. Owner Jim Irsay deciding to keep them together through 2019 anyway was as big an upset as Jets over Colts in Super Bowl III. Luck's weapons include WRs T.Y. Hilton (1,124 yards), Donte Moncrief (733 yards) and aging RB Frank Gore (967 yards). Top needs are a stronger offensive line—No. 1 draft C Ryan Kelly will be a godsend—and upgrading the defense. The intradivision gap is closing on the league's oldest team.

2 ► HOUSTON TEXANS

The Texans (9-7) overcame a 1-4 start to somehow win the division with a quarterback committee exposed when journeyman Brian Hoyer threw four INTs in a 30-0 playoff loss to the Chiefs. They outbid John Elway's Broncos for QB Brock Osweiler. WR DeAndre Hopkins was a monster with 111 receptions, 1,521 yards and 11 TDs. Mad Men DE J.J. Watt (17.5 sacks) and LB Brian Cushing (110 tackles) lead a roughneck defense that hopes OLB Jadeveon Clowney can stay healthy for a change. No. 1 draft WR Will Fuller complements Hopkins, and No. 3 draft WR Braxton Miller is a playmaker. RB Lamar Miller (872 yds) replaces Arian Foster. The city will be hosting the Super Bowl—all Killen's BBQ questions should be sent to NT Vince Wilfork, the large man in the overalls.

3 ► JACKSONVILLE JAGUARS

Somebody up there likes Coach Gus Bradley. Despite an NFL-worst 9-39 record the last three years, he was rewarded with a contract extension. "I expect Gus to have his best year," says owner Shah Khan. In his second season, QB Blake Bortles improved from 11 TD passes to 35 while throwing for 4,428 yards. Allen Robinson had a breakout year (80 catches, 1,400 yards, 14 TDs) and teams with Allen Hurns to form the deadliest WR tandem in the NFL. Promising rookie RB T.J. Yeldon (740 yards) and ex-Jet Chris Ivory, the AFC's top rusher, (1,070 yards) tote the mail. The defense has been upgraded by GM David Caldwell with Malik Jackson, Tashaun Gipson, No. 1 draft Jalen Ramsey and No. 2 draft LB Myles Jack and welcomes back 2015 No. 1 pick pass rusher Dante Fowler.

4 ► TENNESSEE TITANS

Marcus Mariota demonstrated he's a franchise quarterback (2,818 yards) even behind a weak offensive line. Mariota missed four games and suffered two MCL injuries as the Titans went 3-13. TE Delanie Walker was a bright spot (94 receptions, 1,088 yards) but that wasn't enough for any Music City concert. After a 1-6 start, Coach Ken Whisenhunt was fired. Mike Mularkey took over but the Titans, 1-7 at home, allowed 30 ppg over the final five games. Adding free agents RB DeMarco Murray (702 yds) and WR Rishard Matthews (662 yds) along with six draft picks in the first three rounds should have them crooning at the Grand Ole Opry.

AFC WEST

Alex Smith (right) shrugged off a 1-5 start to spearhead the Kansas City Chiefs to 10 straight wins last season, making the playoffs, but he's expected to finish second once again to the Denver Broncos, despite their loss of legendary QB Peyton Manning.

1 ► DENVER BRONCOS

The Broncos (12-4) won their third Super Bowl and first since John Elway retired to turn Ham Newton into a postgame introvert. Peyton Manning's retirement and Brock Osweiler's departure means Mark Sanchez is the bridge QB to No. 1 draft Memphis' Paxton Lynch. Savvy move by the old buttfumbler, dining at an Elway's Steakhouse soon after his Mile High arrival. Led by OLB Von Miller, there's little worry about a defense that led the NFL with 52 sacks, although Malik Jackson and Danny Trevathan left in free agency. RB C.J. Anderson (720 yards) and downfield weapons WRs Demaryius Thomas (105 catches, 1,304 yards) and Emmanuel Sanders (76 receptions, 1,135 yards) are Coach Gary Kubiak's best threats.

2 ► KANSAS CITY CHIEFS

The Chiefs won 10 straight games (allowing only 12.0 points per outing) to become the first team to win a playoff game after opening 1-5. Alex Smith showed he's more than a stopgap quarterback (3,486 yards, 20 TDs, 7 INTs) despite suffering 45 sacks. His favorite targets are WR Jeremy Maclin (87 grabs, 1,088 yards) and TE Travis Kelce (72 catches, 875 yards). RB Jamaal Charles returns from a torn MCL. Andy Reid's defense may have to compensate for the absence of OLB Justin Houston (ACL surgery), who had 56 sacks in 70 games. Marcus Peters, the 2015 No. 1 draft, led the league with 8 INTs on a defense with 29 takeaways.

3 ► OAKLAND RAIDERS

After 13 straight non-winning seasons, the 7-9 Raiders are primed to just win, baby. (Or just sin, baby if they move to Las Vegas.) QB Derek Carr threw for 3,987 yards and his TD total for his first two years (53) is second only to Dan Marino's 63. Carr played catch with WRs Amari Cooper (72 receptions, 1,070 yards) and Michael Crabtree (85 catches, 922 yards). Latavius Murray (1,066 yards) was the first Raiders back to rush for 1,000 yards since 2010. The offensive line, which adds G Kelechi Osemele, is among the best. Linebacker Khalil Mack (15 sacks) will become even more dangerous with help from free-agent OLB additions Bruce Irvin and Aldon Smith.

4 ► SAN DIEGO CHARGERS

A banged-up offensive line and a lack of playmakers contributed to the Chargers' worst season (4-12) since 2003. The boobirds were yearning for Marty Schottenheimer, who was fired in 2006. Diminutive RB Danny Woodhead (1,091 yards from scrimmage) stood tall, and gritty QB Philip Rivers threw for 4,792 yards and 29 TDs. WR Keenan Allen's return will help immensely, as will ex-Browns WR Travis Benjamin. RB Melvin Gordon was a disappointment. There's no welcome mat in Los Angeles, but draft prizes Ohio State DE Joey Bosa and Arkansas TE Hunter Henry will make an impact.



NFC EAST

There is new blood running the New York Giants after three losing seasons as new coach Ben McAdoo takes control of Big Blue. Running back Rashad Jennings (left) will be key, as will a restocked defense built on \$200 million worth of free-agency spending.



1 ► NEW YORK GIANTS

After three consecutive losing seasons and no playoffs since Super Bowl XLVI, owners John Mara and Steve Tisch “fired” Tom Coughlin and anointed offensive coordinator Ben McAdoo, who has slimmed down enough to treat himself to the chicken Francese at Elio’s. The 6-10 Giants lost six games by a total of 15 points. QB Eli Manning flourished (4,432 yards, 35 TDs) with dynamic WR Odell Beckham Jr. (96 catches, 1,450 yards, 13 TDs). Victor Cruz remains a question mark, and RB Rashad Jennings (863 yards) finished strong. The defense was an embarrassment. A \$200 million free-agency splurge by embattled GM Jerry Reese imported DE Olivier Vernon, DT Damon Harrison, CB Janoris Jenkins, and resigned Jason Pierre-Paul for one year. Maybe he should recruit Chris Christie for the offensive line. Oh wait—he’s a Cowboys fan.

2 ► DALLAS COWBOYS

In 1994 Cowboys owner Jerry Jones proclaimed, “There are 500 coaches who could have won the Super Bowl with our team.” Not with this team, which went 4-12 after losing QB Tony Romo to a third broken collarbone and has gone 1-13 over the past five seasons in games without him. Jones hopes No. 1 draft RB Ezekiel Elliott, behind an elite offensive line, can mimic DeMarco Murray of 2014 and help WR Dez Bryant (31 catches, 401 yards in nine games) and TE Jason Witten take the heat off his 36-year-old QB. A defense that was last in the league with 11 takeaways (fewest in NFL history) must weather four-game suspensions for DEs Randy Gregory and DeMarcus Lawrence. Deion Sanders anyone?

3 ► PHILADELPHIA EAGLES

Owner Jeffrey Lurie sent Coach Chip Kelly (26-21) packing before the final game of a 7-9 campaign, so former personnel boss Howie Roseman quickly remade the Eagles roster. He boldly traded up in the draft to snatch North Dakota St. QB Carson Wentz, who will redshirt behind QB Sam Bradford (3,725 yards). New coach Doug Pederson will lean on WR Jordan Matthews (85 receptions, 997 yards) and TE Zach Ertz (75 catches, 853 yards). The attacking 4-3 Jim Schwartz defense is led by DE Fletcher Cox (9.5 sacks) and MLB Jordan Hicks, but the secondary isn’t nearly as good as a cheesesteak from Pat’s. Or Geno’s. Or any cheesesteak.

4 ► WASHINGTON REDSKINS

Kirk Cousins led Jay Gruden to a 9-7 record and the NFC East title and became the team’s first QB (4,166 yards, 29 TDs) to toss a TD pass in all 16 games since the league went to the 16-game schedule. But those wins came against teams with losing records and Green Bay routed them in the playoffs. Cousins has a quality target in TE Jordan Reed (87 grabs, 952 yards) and No. 1 draft WR Josh Doctson joins 2017 free agent WRs Pierre Garçon (72 catches, 777 yards) and DeSean Jackson. Fumble-prone RB Matt Jones replaces Alfred Morris. Carolina CB Josh Norman signed an epic five-year \$75 million contract. OLB Ryan Kerrigan is the alpha male pass rusher, but the run defense is suspect. The offensive line, which has allowed 85 sacks over two years, won’t be offered Secret Service body-guard jobs by the next president.



LEFT: AL BELLO/GETTY IMAGES; RIGHT: EVAN HABEEB/GETTY IMAGES

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NFC NORTH

Ferocious and relentless Green Bay defender Clay Matthews (No. 52 at right) will make life hard for NFC North teams, including Minnesota quarterback Teddy Bridgewater, as he brings a tougher pass rush to a Green Bay team that went 5-3 on its home turf last season.

1 ► GREEN BAY PACKERS

The Packers (10-6 after a 6-0 start) ought to be better than 5-3 at Lambeau Field, home of the 120-yard bratwurst. Aaron Rodgers, who was banged up most of the season, still came through with 3,821 yards and 31 TDs, although his average dropped. Jordy Nelson, who missed last season, returns at WR. Eddie Lacy, a 1,000-yard runner his first two years, was overweight last season, regressed to 758 yards and found himself on the bench—he no longer resembles Bartolo Colón. Ex-Rams TE Jared Cook gives Rodgers a deep threat down the middle, the pass rush should improve with Clay Matthews moving back to OLB, and No. 1 pick Kenny Clark is being counted on to shore up the run defense. The Cheeseheads love the easy schedule.

2 ► MINNESOTA VIKINGS

At age 31, Adrian Peterson remains the NFL's most destructive back behind a bolstered offensive line. His third straight rushing title (1,485 on 327 carries) carried the 11-5 Vikings to the division title. QB Teddy Bridgewater (3,231 yards) needed another weapon aside from revelation WR Stefon Diggs (52 receptions, 720 yards). A talent-laden young defense, led by DE Everson Griffen (10.5 sacks), OLB Anthony Barr and S Harrison Smith, is Coach Mike Zimmer's calling card. No. 1 draft Ole Miss WR Laquon Treadwell is the big possession receiver who will allow Bridgewater to move forward from his game manager role.

3 ► DETROIT LIONS

The automobile industry has recovered in Motown, but not the Lions, who have made only two playoff appearances in 16 years and haven't won a playoff game since Bill Clinton was elected president. Owner Martha Firestone Ford kicked front office butt and the Lions rallied to finish 7-9. QB Matthew Stafford did wonders (4,262 yards, 32 TDs) with practically no ground game (an NFL-low 1,335 yards) or protection (44 sacks). He will miss retired WR Calvin Johnson. Ex-Bengal WR Marvin Jones (65 grabs, 816 yards) is the new sidekick for WR Golden Tate (90 catches, 813 yards). The return of LB DeAndre Levy won't restore the roar.

4 ► CHICAGO BEARS

Coach John Fox found his hair turning 50 shades of grey in his first season in the Windy City. The docile Bears (6-10) led the league in holding penalties. QB Jay Cutler is often criticized, but he's not the problem. Injury-plagued WR Alshon Jeffery (54 receptions, 807 yards) was his only dangerous weapon, but 2015 No. 1 draft WR Kevin White is back after missing the season (shin). Losing Matt Forte leaves uninspiring Jeremy Langford as part of an RB committee. Ex-Bronco LB Danny Trevathan and ex-Colt LB Jerrell Freeman strengthen the defense. No. 1 draft pick Georgia OLB Leonard Floyd, a tall, skinny 244-pounder, will help the pass rush (33 sacks) opposite Pernell McPhee and a secondary that ranked 30th, but he needs to load up on the steaks at Ditka's.

NFC SOUTH

Cam Newton (right) got his Carolina Panthers off to a 14-0 start last year and made it all the way to the Super Bowl with his combination of passing and rushing. Can the Panthers become the first team since the Bills to lose a Super Bowl and return the following year?

1 ► CAROLINA PANTHERS

The Panthers (15-1) probably won't start 14-0 again but the return of WR Kelvin Benjamin (knee surgery) gives MVP QB Cam Newton a 6-foot-5 option. Newton (3,837 passing yards, 35 TDs, 636 yards rushing) could surpass his 2015 numbers. His No. 1 weapon is TE Greg Olsen (77 grabs, 1,104 yards) followed by WR Ted Ginn Jr. (739 yards, 10 TDs). Jonathan Stewart (989 yards) is the horse who keeps pounding. The rock-solid defense is led by Luke Kuechly, Thomas Davis and Kawann Short (11 sacks). A secondary that had a league-high 24 INTs will have to compensate for the unexpected departure of Josh Norman. The 1993 Bills were the last team to lose a Super Bowl and return the following year. Carolina might be the next.

2 ► NEW ORLEANS SAINTS

The Drew Brees/Sean Payton flying circus rages on. In 10 years on Bourbon Street Brees has thrown more than 600 passes eight times, accumulating 4,870 yards and 32 TDs in 2015. He has speed demon WRs in Brandin Cooks (84 catches, 1,138 yards) and Willie Snead (69 grabs, 984 yards), but WR Marques Colston was let go and TE Ben Watson is now a Raven. Ex-Colt TE Coby Fleener will be a red-zone target. The addition of LB James Laurinaitis, DT Nick Fairley and No. 1 draft DT Sheldon Rankins should tighten a leaky defense, but a secondary that allowed an NFL-record 45 TDs gives the clientele at Galatoire's indigestion.

3 ► ATLANTA FALCONS

Rookie coach Dan Quinn started 5-0 before losing five games by four points or less and finishing 8-8. QB Matt Ryan (4,591 yards) was hit 90 times and sacked 30. His prime target was WR Julio Jones (a team-record 136 receptions for 1,871 yards). RB Devonta Freeman was a breakout star (1,056 yards and 11 TDs). Slot WR Mohamed Sanu comes from the Bengals with his 394 yards and 11.9 average, helping replace Roddy White, while new center Alex Mack stabilizes the offensive line. No. 1 draft Keanu Neal strengthens a porous secondary, but the pass rush (an NFL-low 19 sacks) is for the birds unless OLB Vic Beasley emerges. They fight harder on "The Real Housewives of Atlanta."

4 ► TAMPA BAY BUCCANEERS

QB Jameis Winston (4,042 passing yards) is a budding superstar. Offensive Coordinator Dirk Koetter, an advocate of the deep ball, replaced Lovie Smith after another last-place finish. RB Doug Martin complemented Winston with 1,673 yards from scrimmage. Winston needs another weapon opposite WR Mike Evans (74 catches, 1,206 yards) and WR Vincent Jackson isn't getting any younger. The Bucs, who committed an NFL-high 109 penalties, hope No. 2 draft Noah Spence can help ex-Giant DE Robert Ayers attack the passer. The young Bucs (NFL-high 64 rookie starts) could learn about seasoning at Bern's Steak House.



NFC WEST

Tyrann Mathieu and the Arizona Cardinals (left) won the NFC West last year, but in 2016 Doug Baldwin and the Seattle Seahawks should finish first in the division. Look for another strong year from quarterback Russell Wilson and the Seahawks' Legion of Boom defense.



1 ► SEATTLE SEAHAWKS

The Seahawks overcame a 2-4 start to make the playoffs (10-6) for the fourth straight time. QB Russell Wilson's passer rating of more than 120 in each of the last five games set an NFL record, and he finished with 4,024 yards and 34 TDs despite being sacked 45 times. Wide receiver Doug Baldwin was his top target (78 catches, 1,069 yards, 14 TDs) but coach Pete Carroll wants more out of TE Jimmy Graham (48 receptions, 2 TDs). With Marshawn Lynch retired, RB Thomas Rawls becomes Beast Mode Lite. No. 1 draft Germain Ifedi should bolster an iffy offensive line. Brandon Browner reunites with Legion of Boom studs Earl Thomas and Richard Sherman, and Michael Bennett brings the heat. The 12th Man gets more excited than Trump at a beauty pageant.

2 ► ARIZONA CARDINALS

Carson Palmer had his best year (4,671 yards, 35 TDs) and led the 13-3 Cardinals to the division crown. Bruce Arians' fearless play calling led to a desert storm—WRs Larry Fitzgerald (109 catches, 1,215 yards), John Brown (65 grabs, 1,003 yards) and Michael Floyd (52 receptions, 849 yards)—until Palmer's six turnover playoff meltdown against the Panthers. Arians is high on second-year RB David Johnson, who replaces Chris Johnson on the league's No. 1 offense (489 points, 58 TDs, 408 yards per game). Arians traded for Chandler Jones (12.5 sacks) to cure his pass rush in front of Patrick Peterson and Tyrann "Honey Badger" Mathieu, with No. 1 pick Robert Nkemdiche from Mississippi a potential menace.

3 ► LOS ANGELES RAMS

Following 21 unforgiving years in St. Louis (64-127 the last 12 years), the Rams are singing "Hooray for Hollywood" again. It's a homecoming for Coach Jeff Fisher, who played at USC and may have solved the Rams' QB quandary with a blockbuster pre-draft deal for pro-ready Cal QB Jared Goff. DE Chris Long and CB Janoris Jenkins are gone, but DT Aaron Donald (11 sacks) is a beast. RB Todd Gurley (1,106 yards, 10 TDs), a rising second-year star, takes pressure off Goff, but the club hasn't seen a 1,000-yard WR since Torrey Holt in 2007. Will Jack Nicholson buy season tickets?

4 ► SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS

Forget leaving hearts in San Francisco—they're broken. It's up to Chip Kelly, exiled by Philly, to resurrect a once-proud franchise that never should have let Jim Harbaugh go. Disgruntled Colin Kaepernick was outplayed at QB by Blaine Gabbert (2,031 yards, 10 TDs) and the 49ers averaged a league-worst 14 points per game while yielding their most rushing yards since 1980. No. 1 draft DE DeForest Buckner joins former Oregon teammate DE Arik Armstead. The toughest strength of schedule? Niners and Falcons. Can Kelly get along with GM Trent Baalke? Harbaugh couldn't. Kelly is as likely to win a Super Bowl as Greg Hardy is to replace Roger Goodell as commissioner. If you enjoy "The Walking Dead," you'll love this team. Only the Kardashians are more painful to watch. Paging Eddie DeBartolo! ♦

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A rematch of Super Bowl XXXI, when Mike Holmgren and Brett Favre defeated Bill Parcells and Drew Bledsoe 35-21. Turnabout 20 years later is fair play. A FOX television dream matchup pitting Tom Brady versus Aaron Rodgers. Mike McCarthy has gotten overly conservative in big games before, and that proves fatal when you can't keep Rob Gronkowski from a couple of his emphatic endzone spikes.

History is made inside NRG Stadium as Brady and Bill Belichick win one for their thumbs and become the greatest quarterback-coach tandem in the Super Bowl era. Will it be President Trump showing up to root his pal Brady on?

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IRELAND'S

*There has never been a better time to play the majestic courses of
Southwest Ireland, an emerald beacon to lovers of links golf*

BY JEFF WILLIAMS



STUNNING COAST

Waves from the Atlantic are the gorgeous backdrop of the 14th hole at Trump Doonbeg, one of many stunning courses that make a trip to the southwest coast of Ireland an unforgettable experience.

Golf by the sea, links golf, is an especially moving experience for the traveling player, and Americans by the charter bus full have sought out the great links of Southwest Ireland for decades. But today the storied old courses at Ballybunion, Lahinch and Waterville are playing better than they have in years, and newer courses like the Old Head Golf Links and the newly renamed and reminted Trump Doonbeg have become bucket-list destinations of their own, making a trip to Ireland's southwestern corner a most rewarding trip.

The economic downturn of 2008 hit golf globally and Ireland was dealt a significant body blow. But nearly a decade later there is a bristling optimism in the seaside air of Ireland and it can be felt and seen on the links of Southwest Ireland. The Olde Sod is renewing itself.

Things are on the real up-and-up in Southwest Ireland, and a recent trip shows the pluck of the Irish is front and center at both the old courses and the new. And there is a new project in Waterville taking shape that promises to up the ante considerably. Here is a course-by-course look at the stunning golf in Southwest Ireland.

Ballybunion Old Course

The Old Course at Ballybunion is now the proud owner of a new set of greens—done to the original specs from more than a century ago—and a passionate superintendent who is intent on getting everything just right.

For Americans, Ballybunion Old was likely the first course to sound the siren call to Ireland. First established in 1883, the club reached out for

an international membership 100 years later and it didn't hurt that five-time British Open champ Tom Watson sang its praises. Playing "BallyB" was a badge of honor to any traveling golfer.

Yet the Old Course was looking and playing its age when the club decided to undertake a much-needed refurbishment that began in 2014 under the direction of Scottish architect Graeme Webster and Penn State-educated superintendent John Bambury.

Key to it all was replacing all the greens in 2015, restoring the surfaces to links-like quality. Because of compaction, poor drainage and the invasion of non-links grasses, the greens had become dodgy and uneven. An exacting hi-tech mapping of every surface was utilized, the result of which is that every contour, every edge, every inch of every green is exactly how it was, but now there is proper drainage and the proper blend of fescue and bent grass that give the greens their proper feel. The Olde Sod was replaced by new sod that was grown by Bambury himself.

One green is new—or an approximation of the very old one. The par 4 seventh now sits closer to the Atlantic, making it both strategically and aesthetically more pleasing. And aesthetics as well as conditioning are at the heart of Bambury's passion for the place.

"Every gem needs to be repolished and reset once in a while, and the Old Course was overdue," says Bambury, who came to Ballybunion after overseeing Donald Trump's highly praised links course in Aberdeen, Scotland. "We wanted to get back to the feel of the traditional links, in both the way the game is played and the way the golfer envisions the course. There were facets of the grounds here that were just not visually pleasing and we feel that the links experience is about the entire environment and not just fairways and greens."

The rather unsightly background of the fifth green has been shielded by a new set of mounds sprigged with traditional marram grass, the long-bladed wavy turf you see on the dunes and mounding between holes in much of Ireland. There are several new areas of marram-clad mounding around the course that are more for the visual experience than for play. That begins at the new putting green, which now has a feel of privacy and is contoured to approximate the putts a golfer will face on the course.

"My work here is to make sure that the positioning of the golf holes



Ballybunion, created in 1883, combines the old and the new. Hole 16 (left) is a picturesque beauty. The reimagined seventh (above) has a green that has been pushed even closer to the ocean, adding beauty as well as risk.

LEFT: STEVE CARR

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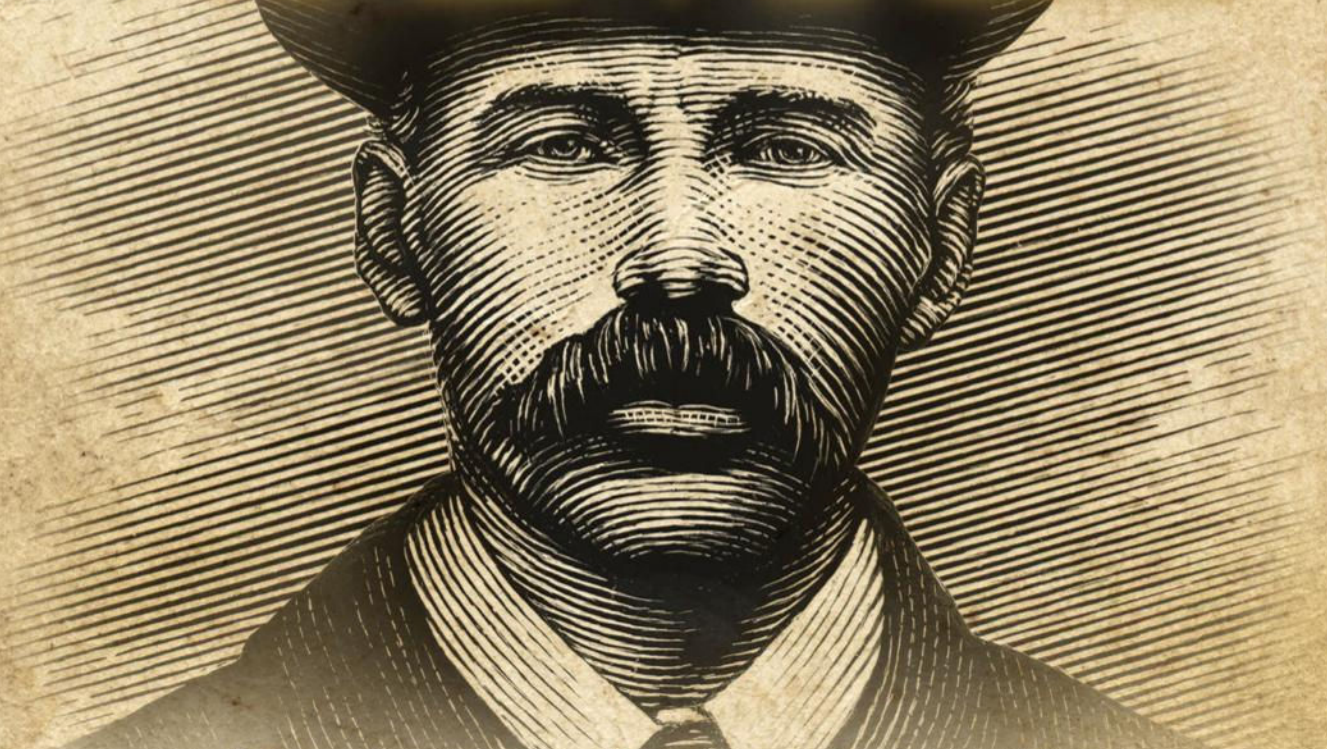


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The view from the back tee of the 17th at Waterville (above) is one of Ireland's finest. Unwind after a round at the Waterville guesthouse (right) with a fine cigar, and a try at the trout that swim in the stream.

and any new 'man-made' areas utilizes this extraordinary piece of property with respect and that new construction blends imperceptibly with the existing land," architect Webster told journalist Ivan Morris. "Couple this with the Atlantic Ocean, seen and enjoyed throughout the majority of the routing at Ballybunion, and you really do have a golfer experience made in Heaven, but discovered on Earth."

Trump Doonbeg

In sharp contrast on the age scale to Ballybunion, the links at Doonbeg is virtually a brand new course, opened in 2002. Work over the last two years has made the course even newer, but keeping to tradition.

The original development of the links at Doonbeg and its magnificent seaside hotel was the work of American Buddy Darby of Kiawah Island, South Carolina, fame, with Greg Norman serving as architect. Presidential hopeful Donald Trump picked the resort up for a song—he says—in 2013 and went about "blowing up" the course with Martin Hawtree—who did his Scottish course—as architect.

"Whatever we said we needed, Mr. Trump gave us," says Doonbeg head pro Brian Shaw, who has been there from the beginning.

Calamity played a role in the reinvigorating of the course. A storm did severe damage to its coastline in 2014, reclaiming the greens at the postage stamp par 3 14th, the par 3 ninth and the par 4 fifth. It gave cause for Hawtree to reimagine things, and a completely new 14th hole, new greens at the third, fifth, seventh, eighth, ninth, 12th and 17th and new surfaces on all 18 greens have given the course a greater playability and a more defined links aesthetic. New tee complexes seem to get lines of play correct, and the new back tees are a real challenge. From the middle tees Doonbeg



is eminently playable by nearly every player, but from the back tees (which extend to more than 6,900 yards) you need to bring an adult game.

"I think because of Aberdeen, I had gained Mr. Trump's confidence," says Hawtree. "When we were doing Aberdeen he would ring me up every week to talk about things. Much less so at Doonbeg. He is an extremely good client, asks good questions, has ideas and is willing to do what needs to be done to make his golf courses the best they can be."

Hawtree looked at the existing course and saw a bit of a hodgepodge, though it was still great fun to play, and some changes rendered to it before Hawtree arrived—namely eliminating some blind but seemingly appropriate tee shots—did not seem necessary.

Hawtree was irritated by many of the course's quirky elements, including the crossover from holes five to six, which involved the 13th green. "You would say it helped that the ocean took back the 14th green and in doing so gave me the opportunity to sort that area out," he says. "Mr. Trump loves holes by the sea and it was important to keep the 14th green in that vicinity, but we came up with a much different hole that I feel still keeps the drama of its seaside setting."

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The 13th at Old Head now sits at the edge of a cliff, making the green a challenging target.

Doonbeg's 10th through 12th holes, which played away from the sea, also lost their links-like characteristics in Hawtree's opinion, so he worked to blend them more into the links landscape. He also got rid of the bunker that was in the back middle of the 12th green, one of the "irritating" quirky elements, though it might have not been so irritating had it been readily visible from the fairway, which proved ultimately to be its fatal flaw.

"I think there was a philosophy of letting nature dictate things, and that's always a good approach, but I felt in some cases it went too far," says Hawtree. "I needed to soften some things up, some of the greens were a bit too severe and I think we were able to get them right."

Waterville Golf Links

The back tee of the par 3 17th at Waterville Golf Links is known as Mulcahy's Peak, in honor of John A. ("Jack") Mulcahy, the club's Irish-American founder. And from this highest point on the course there may not be a better view of links golf in Ireland.

Waterville is often referred to as the best course that will never host a British Open. The tiny town of fewer than 500 full-time residents sits at the end of Iveragh Peninsula on Ballinskelligs Bay. Though it's a little over an hour and change from Killarney, Waterville's serene remoteness wraps itself around your emotions. That's particularly true at Waterville Golf Links,

"Work is always ongoing here. If you want a really good links experience, you have to work at it, and boy have we worked at it."

—JAY CONNOLLY, WATERVILLE GOLF LINKS

whether coursing through the dunes or skirting the Inny estuary and the bay.

Golf was brought to Waterville by workers who manned the first Atlantic cable station in the 1880s. It was a simple nine-hole layout then, but when Mulcahy came to Waterville in search of links land, the golf landscape was forever changed. He enlisted the iconic Irish architect Eddie Hackett and his close friend, Winged Foot professional Claude Harmon, to design a strong test of golf and the course opened in 1973.

When the course was sold to a group of Irish Americans in 1987, the process of continually updating the links began and American architect Tom Fazio was brought in to make some significant changes—building two new holes and altering others, while the club also undertook erosion-control

measures that assured its precious links would last for generations.

"We know we have a special place here, and we also knew that we could lose it if we didn't do something about the erosion issue," says managing partner Jay Connolly. "Work is always ongoing here. We have a long-term project to get rid of the broad leaf grasses that aren't common to links golf. If you want a really good links experience, you have to work at it, and boy have we worked at it."

The complete Waterville experience should come with a stay at Waterville House, the guesthouse on the bay that is owned by the club. It is such an abiding country home, with a stream outside the door known as the Butler's Pool, that is an excellent place to fly-fish for trout and salmon in season, not to mention smoking a cigar as you do it. Across the stream is a golf practice range, another fine place for a smoke, especially if you grab a glass of Irish whiskey from the Waterville House's public room.

Your Waterville experience should also include a conversation with club secretary Noel Cronin and its longtime professional Liam Higgins, the sort of characters that put an exclamation mark on golf at this exceptional links.

Old Head Golf Links

The late John O'Connor, an avid cigar smoker who founded the Old Head Golf Links in Kinsale, strove constantly for perfection on the most spectacular golf site in the world. The Old Head, a big rock table nearly 300 feet above the Atlantic Ocean, marvels all who play it. That drive to perfection continues under brother Patrick O'Connor, club manager Jim O'Brien and club pro Danny Brassil.

"Someone asked me if John was difficult to work for," says O'Brien with a sparkle in his eye. "I said 'no, he was impossible.'"

Ever since the course opened in 1998 it has been a work in progress, with continual alterations to holes, to the marvelous landscaping and the addition of suites to the small but spectacularly sited clubhouse, changes driven by John O'Connor. And changes keep coming, also driven by O'Connor.

In 2014, the par 3 13th became the latest to be placed on a lip of the Old Head's acrophobia-inducing cliffs, moved across the club access road from its inland site. It's a gem of a short hole with green challenging to hit and to putt.

The green of the par 3 16th, which sits on the heavily exposed northern side of the course, was replaced again, and this time was made slightly wider and space created to its right, above the cliff line, for some bunkering that will save a few shots from watery graves.

The tinkering never stops. There are some new tees, and an especially appealing one on the par 5 12th where the views of the caverns at the base of the cliff line are a moving experience, especially at the time of year when thousands of birds are using them for their rookeries. There are the ruins of an ancient lighthouse and small outbuildings on the property that soon may be accessible, and the thought is to push the par 5 sixth right up to the base of them, again creating as much drama in a course filled with it.

“John was always looking to do something,” says O’Brien of the club’s late founder. “And I think we always will.”

Lahinch Golf Club

Two names ring with crystal clarity at Lahinch Golf Club: Old Tom Morris and Alister MacKenzie. Old Tom, the legendary St Andrews pro, was invited in 1894 to improve on a course laid out in 1892 by members on a dunes-laden stretch of County Clare next to the Atlantic coastal town of Lahinch. There were some further changes, then MacKenzie, whose reputation was already internationally renowned, arrived in 1927 to put his stamp on the land.

That stamp wouldn’t be the last, and the club has continually searched to find just the right mix of playability and aesthetic.

In 1999, Martin Hawtree, who was already consulting with the Royal and Ancient Golf Club on changes to several British Open courses, was



Playing a round at Lahinch Golf Club (above) allows a golfer to see the work of Old Tom Morris, who improved the course back in 1894.

asked to reconsider Lahinch. He created two new par 3s, the eighth and the 11th, rerouted four others and sorted out some bunkering.

What he didn’t do was change Lahinch’s most distinctive holes, the par 5 fourth and the par 3 fifth, the two remaining Old Tom Morris holes. The fourth, known as the Klondyke, has a large mound which totally obscures the green about 140 yards beyond it. The fifth, which is called Dell, is one of the most famous par 3s in all of golf with a totally blind shot over a large dune ridge. The greenskeepers move a large stone atop the ridge each day to help players align their shot with the pin.

In the works right now is a new short game practice facility, something unusual at Olde Sod courses, across the street from the clubhouse. It’s precious land, and ripe for residential development, but the club has chosen to devote it to the development of its players’ games.

“We know we have to constantly look at the course and how we do

things here,” says Paddy Keane, Lahinch’s general manager. “It’s a competitive business and we have a very good name that we’ll work hard to keep. People keep coming back, and we want people coming back.”

Hogs Head Golf Club

Hogs Head Golf Club, a new course in Waterville on the land of the former Skellig Bay Golf Club, is taking shape under the direction of American architect Robert Trent Jones Jr.

Founded by Bryan Marsal and Tony Alvarez of the New York-based international financial consulting firm of Alvarez & Marsal, Hogs Head will be a completely different course, a “blowup” as they say in the business. It sits on the headland abutting Ballinskelligs Bay, across from Waterville House, and 13 additional waterfront acres were purchased that allow for new holes near the water.

“It’s one of the great sites we’ve ever worked on,” says Jones. “It’s a great open site with exposure to the elements with the wind as the invisible hazard.”

Hogs Head will be a private club with some public access that will be open May through October. The club’s concept, Marsal says, is based on the camaraderie that he and Alvarez enjoy on trips to the Bohemian Grove, the artsy, philosophical and recreational retreat in Monte Rio, California.

“It’s built by friends for friends,” says Marsal.

Targeted for play later next summer, Hogs Head is being properly built with sand-capped fairways and extensive drainage. “It will be firm, fast and fun,” says Jones.

The site development includes tearing down the old nearby Lake Hotel and replacing it with a more appropriate 48-room lodge and the creation of 15 cottages. There will also be a new clubhouse.

“We think it will make Waterville much more of an overnight destination instead of a day trip from Killarney,” says Waterville Links’ Jay Connolly. “They are doing the right things there.”

Others

For extended trips to the Southwest Ireland, there are several more interesting courses meriting a look. The Dooks Golf Club, not too far north of Waterville, is a lovely and somewhat quirky links that is worth the trip. Farther out of the way, but perhaps worth the effort, is the Dingle Golf Club on the Dingle Peninsula.

Just to the south of Ballybunion is the links of the Tralee Golf Club, an Arnold Palmer design that goes back to the 1970s that has been updated. The par 4 12th hole is one of the real bears in all of links golf.

Americans headed for Southwest Ireland generally travel through Shannon Airport. Just down the road is Dromoland Castle, a lovely hotel that has a parkland course that’s good for getting the kinks out after a long flight, or as a final destination before the trip home.

“The Southwest of Ireland is running in tandem with the resurgence of the Irish economy,” says Brendan Keogh, CEO of the travel business SWING that specializes in the Southwest. “The demand for golf is very high and is reaching capacity at some courses. There is certainly an element of people traveling who had cancelled plans due to the economic turndown. It certainly confirms that this beautiful region of Ireland is back on track.” ❖

Jeff Williams is a contributing editor of CIGAR AFICIONADO.



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VIP early access 5:30 p.m. entry. VIP Tickets give you more time to visit with the cigar makers and collect your cigars.

Friday and Saturday evenings, from 6:30-9:30 p.m., are our traditional, fun-filled, Big Smoke Evenings. Join your fellow cigar lovers in an atmosphere of good cigars, good drinks, good food and great companionship.

Walk around and enjoy cigars from more than 25 premium cigar producers. Your ticket price includes a cigar from each cigar exhibitor. Cigars will be listed on LasVegasBigSmoke.com as well as CigarAficionado.com on September 15.

Complementing this perfect evening are premium liquors, wines, beer, and other fine spirits from the extensive array of drink exhibitors, as well as a delicious buffet specially created for a cigar maven.

Also on display are luxury cars, golf equipment and many more items appealing to every aficionado.



Big Smoke Seminars

Saturday and Sunday daytime hours will be filled with a series of seminars geared to the varied interests of our readers. These will be taught by experts in each field and are designed to be interesting, fun and instructive.

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 12

Saturday morning's program is scheduled from 9 a.m.-12:30 p.m. followed by a sit-down lunch lasting until 3 p.m. David Savona, executive editor, *Cigar Aficionado*, is moderator for the weekend program.

CIGAR AFICIONADO'S TOP THREE LEGAL CIGARS OF 2015 TASTING.

The top cigars of 2015 were selected by our senior editors and announced on the *Cigar Aficionado* website in December 2015. When you enter, you will be given a packet containing the top three legal cigars of 2015. At each of the morning cigar breaks we will designate one cigar to smoke. Each cigar maker is onstage to talk about their cigar:

#1 CIGAR—My Father Le Bijou 1922 Torpedo Box Pressed presented by the Garcia family

#3 CIGAR—CAO Flathead V660 Carb presented by General Cigar

#4 CIGAR—Arturo Fuente Don Carlos Belicoso presented by Carlos Fuente Jr., president, A. Fuente y Cia.

A CIGAR LOVER'S GUIDE TO CUBA. A look at what has changed, what has not, and what you need to know before you go. Presented by Gordon Mott, senior contributing editor, and David Savona, executive editor, *Cigar Aficionado*.

THE NEXT GENERATION. Meet the heirs to cigar dynasties making their mark on the future of their brands. Moderated by Gregory Mottola, senior editor, and Andrew Nagy, associate editor, *Cigar Aficionado*: Tony Gomez, La Flor Dominicana; Raquel Quesada, Quesada Cigars; Liana Fuente, Arturo Fuente Cigars.

ANATOMY OF A CIGAR. Exactly what is a cigar? At this seminar we take it apart and try to understand it from the inside out, from fill to wrapper. The panel of experts will be announced.

HONDURAN CIGARS. An inside look at what makes them so distinctive by a panel of experts on Honduran cigars and tobacco.

LUNCH WITH OLIVA CIGAR COMPANY. Enjoy a delicious seated lunch hosted by Jose Oliva, president, Oliva Cigar Company. There will be cigars for everyone and plenty of time for a Q & A session.

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 13

Sunday's program from 9:30 a.m.-1:00 p.m. consists of three seminars on a lighter note involving a hands-on approach.

CIGAR LOVERS' BREAKFAST. Start the day with a real *Cigar Aficionado's* breakfast. Culinary Director Nicole Brisson from CarneVino returns to create a breakfast menu specifically designed for this cigar-loving crowd. She will share some of her tales from the kitchen. Of course, we will find the perfect cigar to match this breakfast.

ROLL YOUR OWN, SEMINAR NO. 19. Michael Giannini and Leo Peraza of General Cigar Co. bring everything you need to create your own cigar including real tobacco as used in a premium cigar factory. Follow along with one of La Gloria Cubana's most experienced premium cigar makers. Whether you've done this before or you are a new roller, everyone enjoys the opportunity to roll and create their own cigar and perhaps win a prize.

TOURING SCOTCH-LAND. From the Highlands to the Lowlands and points in between, single-malt Scotch offers a breadth of local styles. *Cigar Aficionado's* senior features editor Jack Bettridge will lead a cigar-pairing journey through the country's many distilling regions.

BUY YOUR E-TICKETS ONLINE AT
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REGISTRATION

Buy a **Big Smoke evening** ticket for **\$325** per ticket each night. With **VIP early access**, **\$375**.

Or, come to the **entire weekend program** for **\$625**. This fee includes Saturday and Sunday seminars, Saturday lunch and one Big Smoke Evening (either Friday or Saturday, you select). With **VIP access it's \$675**.

HOTEL

Why not stay for the weekend at The Mirage and enjoy all the gaming, entertainment, and fine dining available. Make your hotel reservations directly with The Mirage. Call toll free 1-800-627-6667 group code **(BIGS16A)** to take advantage of the special rates available. Or, reserve online at <https://resweb.passkey.com/go/BIGSM16>.

Please note that our hotel room block is held until October 14th. Make your reservations early.

Cheater Catcher

An eagle-eyed security agent has a particular talent for spotting card counters and casino hustlers before anyone else

by Michael Kaplan ■ illustrations by Riki Blanco

IT'S A SATURDAY AFTERNOON in an American gambling city. Over hamburgers and french fries, one of casino-gaming's most imposing security men—an enforcer who specializes in catching cheaters, card counters and a wide berth of players whose techniques can significantly detract from a gambling den's profits—dishes on some of the scariest players in the world. He casually drops names like John Chang (Kevin Spacey's character in the movie *21* was partly based on Chang), Maria T. (brilliant cofounder of a notorious card counting team known as "The Greeks") and Richard Marcus (author of the book *American Roulette*, which focuses on him and his team of unrepentant cheats). Wearing a baseball cap, chinos, golf shirt and sneakers, he talks about people who, under the right circumstances, can extract sums in the six figures from unwitting casinos in a single day.

For the sake of his career, he asks that we refer to him only as BC (let's say that it stands for Beating Cheaters). He loves the chase and savors victories. For him, more than 20 years in, nailing scammers and advantage players is as much a passion play as it is a job. In fact, it took only one night in a surveillance room for BC to be hooked on finding people who hurt the bottom lines of casinos and tossing them out. Prior to his first stint manning an all-seeing eye-in-the-sky security camera, BC had been hired to do criminal investigations for joints in Atlantic City, using skills he picked up in the military.

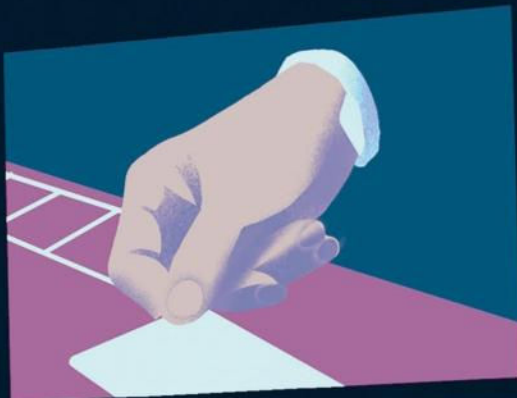
After a few years, though, BC left AC and moved to Las Vegas. "I figured I could have a career in Vegas instead of just a job in Atlantic City," he offers. BC almost immediately began working for a major casino company and quickly snagged his seat in the surveillance room. "Right from the start," he says, "I spotted all kinds of shit that other people missed. I guess I have a knack for being observant, and I love it. I got off on tracking people who had no clue that I was watching them. Death from above, baby!"

At first, he watched the entire resort that employed him. BC

looked for crooks shoplifting from the sundries shop or lurking near the self-park garage. He began making a name for himself after busting a group of thieves looting \$200 robes out of the spa. It doesn't sound like much, but the losses add up. He saw shoplifters and scam artists and a woman who expertly spirited away chips from players' stacks. Eventually, the gaming side of the operation recruited him. "That," BC says, "was when I went on a tear. The first guys I caught were members of a count team from MIT. It was a rush to take them down."

He liked the variety of the job, what he saw while spying on the inner workings of a gambling operation. Watching everything that transpired in the casino, he went beyond simply the playing of games and trying to spot hot-looking chicks sitting alongside their high-roller boyfriends. "You watched it all," he says, his voice still containing a hint of marvel over the visual adventures that still unfold before him each shift. "You watch the cage, you watch the soft count, people bringing in money, money going out, marker redemption. It's not just eyeballing the game. In a big place, you might have five people in the surveillance room." They all work with varying degrees of seriousness and diligence, BC says. At least that's the case in places like Vegas and Atlantic City. But, he adds, at tribal casinos it's something else altogether: "The tribes really understand it. They know it's the tribe's money, not some big corporation's money, and they take care of it."

One of BC's first big catches was a group of con artists pulling off a roulette scam. It capitalized on the fact that when you play roulette, you do not bet with actual chips. You bet with variously colored nondenominational chips that the crew running the wheel gives you in exchange for chips that are actually worth money. Let's say you want to bet \$1 per spin, you give \$25 and they give you 25 blue chips, it's marked that the blue chips are worth \$1 each. They're your color.



That works pretty well until thieves decide to exploit it. “It was early days, I was up in surveillance and they asked me to watch the wheel,” remembers BC, who did as he was told. “For two days I saw nothing. Then I got frustrated and started to think about what I would do if I was down there on the floor instead of up here with a camera. I would back up and try to get a broader view. I did it and saw two guys staring at each other and locking eyes. Why would they do that? It didn’t look right. They didn’t seem to be lovers and appeared to have no interest in fighting. Then a third got into it and they all headed to the bathroom. I later learned that that’s where they went to switch chips. Now a new guy comes to the table, carrying a bunch of blue chips in his pocket—though nobody on the game knows it, of course. He wants to play for \$50 a spin and announces that blue is his lucky color. He buys \$1,000 worth of blue chips and now, all of a sudden, those \$1 blue chips that he has in his pocket are worth \$50 each. He sneaks them out and snakes the casino. We arrested that group the next day.”

BC considers this for a moment and then says, I assume kiddingly, “That one was so good that I kept it as my retirement scam—until a bunch of cheaters beat it to death.”

One of the great things about working surveillance or on the casino floor is all the crazy flim-flammy you get to witness. From his vantage point, BC took in a team of Chinese card markers who kept tiny razor blades under their fingernails and used them to lay in all-but-imperceptible scratches that marked cards. “They were Tongs,” he remembers. “They would have chopped me up and killed me. The operation was called Jade Blade.” But he points out that he’s seen an easier way to mark cards: You Superglue a grain of sand to your finger and use it to slightly indent the backs of aces and face-cards to crush Casino War, a ridiculous sucker bet to which nobody in the casino normally pays a whole lot of attention.

Beyond all that, one of his more memorable moments came when he had the opportunity to witness a team of Asian cheaters who performed money-making magic by literally having cards up their sleeves. It begins with getting your hands on a casino’s deck of cards. “That’s not hard,” insists BC. “I’ve got decks of cards from multiple casinos at home. How did I get them?” The question is rhetorical and hangs in the air. Armed with their decks, the Asian team pulled one key card ahead of time. In this case, the game being played was baccarat, so the key card would be an 8. Slipping the card into the game—after creating a winning hand for yourself—is fairly easy for those who have the stomach and dexterity for it. The hard part can be to slip a card of the same denomination out of the game.

The reason this is necessary, says BC, is because cards in the game get inspected after being used. If there is, say, an extra 8 of spades in the decks, questions will be asked and video will be reviewed. “The agent watching the play caught it,” remembers BC. “Security got called but they had no idea about what they were getting into. They tackled the cheater without realizing that the card in his pocket was our evidence. We needed it in order to prove he was guilty. Quicker and smoother than you can imagine, the cheater pulled out his card, folded it up and swallowed it. Clearly this was a practiced move and not the first time he had done it. We had no evidence of what had occurred. It was brought before the Gaming Commission and they said, ‘You have no proof. Pay the man. Have a nice day.’”

But that may not even be the smoothest cheating move he’s

witnessed. While BC has no love for those who get over on the house, he does grudgingly respect them and offers props to operators who excel at the dark art. Among the top is a notoriously talented cheat by the name of Richard Marcus. He perfected a play that he came to call the Savannah, named after a blond-haired porn star for whom he had a particular

“Quicker and smoother than you can imagine, the cheater pulled out his card, folded it up and swallowed it.”



fondness. Marcus would play a hand of blackjack, with, say, three green \$25 chips stacked in front of him. If he lost, he would give up \$75. If he won, though, Marcus would slip in a yellow \$1,000 chip and remove the bottom green. He did it with the speed and smoothness of a close-up magician. Nobody saw it happening and he’d essentially be risking \$75 with the opportunity to make \$1,050 if he won.

But Marcus added a component to the maneuver that impressed BC. “As soon as the dealer paid him, he swapped the chips in and out, grabbed the dealer’s hand and told her that she mis-paid; it was sheer beauty in that it not only pulled off the play but actually blocked everyone’s eye from the swap,” BC says, shaking his head, clearly impressed. “That one thing threw everything off and put the whole pit out of synch. There’s a good chance that if the dealer has been working there for 25 years, he’s the first person to have done that, to have touched the dealer’s hand. They focused on that rather than on the bet. Marcus and his crew probably got told not to touch anyone, but it was after the fact. It was too late. His touching the dealer was like somebody throwing cold water in your face for no reason. You just paid him and moved on. I caught him and came to know the play but actually enjoyed watching him work. Like I said, it was really beautiful.”

Other moves were more blunt-force, less artful and sometimes left BC wondering why the perpetrators bothered doing them in the first place. He remembers seeing one successful card counter—counting will get you thrown out of the casino but not arrested—who actually crossed over to be a hard-core cheater, doing the very things that will land you in jail. In particular, BC saw him pulling a move known as card bending. It is exactly what it sounds like: You over-handle the aces in a deck and bend them slightly. This allows a player to easily cut to that card since it is lifted up from the rest of the deck—and to know when the dealer has one.

“Members of this particular team made a million dollars counting,” says BC, “and they did it relatively quickly. I couldn’t understand why they would cheat. Then I found out that it’s because cheating allowed them to make \$2 million in half the time that it took to earn \$1 million by counting.”

Inside his home, BC maintains a dense library of books on cheating and advantage play. He has volumes by Steve Forte (a former casino consultant who has since been shamed over accusations that he participated in a poker scam at Borgata), James Grosjean (the brilliant advantage player whose *Beyond Counting* is a bible for those aiming to legally win in casinos) and Celine (the pseudonym for a former surveillance man, now deceased, who wrote a slender volume that tipped off

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advantage players about how things work on the other side of the camera lens). He even has a few albums released by Daryl Purpose, a seriously gifted advantage player who performs folk music on the side. Purpose has been known to take out his phone and show off video surveillance footage that depicts him cutting to a royal flush and winning \$100,000 for his fleet-fingered efforts. "I like Daryl's playing," says BC, referring to the professional gambler's music. "He's pretty talented."

While many in the business make little distinction between legal and illegal maneuvers, BC finds himself particularly taken by the craftsmen who devise ways of winning big without breaking laws. He admits that his quest to focus on the brilliant rather than the lawless has probably prevented him from shutting down some big-time cheaters. But, as Woody Allen said when making excuses for being romantically involved with Sun-Yi Previn, "The heart wants what the heart wants." BC's heart wants to match wits against players who skirt the law but do not break it.

He knows that many of the advantage players are near geniuses and operate differently from those with larceny in their souls. He brags about the scalps he's taken. There's Rob Reitzen whose team was called Core. "He wore a hat in the casino that said Core on it," recalls B.C. "I busted him because he was giving us the finger." Then there was Frank Schipani,

"It's like playing a game and trying to win. You figure out what these guys are doing and get a nice kick out of it. You solve a new puzzle each time."



inventor of the big player move, in which a bettor slips into a blackjack game and wagers only when the count is high. And, of course, Jeff Ma, a key member of the MIT blackjack team who later made a fortune in Silicon Valley and now serves as ESPN's "predictive analytics expert," a fancy title for a mathematically inclined handicapper.

"It's fun to compete against them," says BC, summarizing what he loves about the business. "Following their trail is a challenge. It's like playing a game and trying to win. When you do win, it feels good. You figure out what these guys are doing and get a nice kick out of it. You solve a new puzzle each time."

Many of his victories involved less notorious targets but were just as satisfying. One night he took down a team that had essentially taken over an entire casino with card counters and spotters monitoring more than a dozen blackjack games and calling in big bettors to make large wagers as soon as a game turned suitably advantageous.

Another time a multicultural team showed him how to card count without appearing to be doing it. They employed correlation betting: instead of having one or two players betting to the count, they had four or five players betting all over the place, but, cumulatively, betting correctly. For example, if the right bet is \$250, but one guy bets \$500, another bets \$150 and a third bets \$100, you get the money out there without it

looking obvious. "Between the money they won at the table and the comps they hustled and sold," he says, "this team earned somewhere between \$13 million and \$15 million—and it took us a while to catch them and shut them down."

He watched in amazement as an Australian group combined a series of plays at a single table—hole carding, ace sequencing, shuffle tracking, card counting, probably more—to realize maximum advantages. Impressed by how effortlessly it all seemed to come off, BC says, "There was a lot of brainpower firing at that table. It was not a normal situation."

He's also seen regular, losing gamblers get brought in to make advantage plays tricky to detect and difficult to curb. After all, the last person that a casino wants to risk offending is a cash-bleeding high-stakes whale. That makes him the perfect person to do the betting for a team that knows how to play at an advantage. Along those lines, BC remembers a now-deceased gambler by the name we'll call Jack Stuart. "He was a million-dollar player and we beat the snot out of him for a long time," says BC. "Then the tables suddenly turned and he was kicking our ass."

It could have been luck, but BC instinctively believed that it must have been something else as well. Then, circulating through the casino, he noticed a career card counter at a blackjack table. A colleague had spotted Stuart and the counter deep in conversation, off of the gaming floor but still on property. "Sometimes you have to make a mistake for us to catch you,"

says BC, pointing out that the collaborators gave themselves away. "That was their mistake: talking to each other in the casino. Once I knew of them being together, their scam was easy to figure out. Stuart played baccarat, which is his game of choice. At appropriate moments, the counter signaled him and he walked away from baccarat. All of a sudden he said he was bored and wanted to hit the blackjack table. He'd come in, make some large wagers—way more than he bet at baccarat—and disappear as soon as the count got bad."

Acknowledging that it's not easy getting a casino to okay ejecting a longtime loser like Stuart, BC managed to secure the necessary clearance. "I told Stuart he couldn't play with us anymore and he laughed. He didn't care. He was just a wealthy guy trying to get his money back. He thought it was all very funny."

As BC finishes this story, he looks around. Early-birders settle in for dinner. The afternoon has pretty much passed. Outside of the restaurant, dusk descends. Casino lights switch on. Evening encroaches and BC's people come out. Benders, scratchers, counters and hole-carders are all preparing to hit casinos and take them down.

Knowing that we'll finish soon, I have one last question. What would BC do if he wanted to get over on a casino? He answers without hesitation. "I'd sit at a blackjack table with a Coke in front of me," he begins. "As soon as I get dealt two aces, I would spill my drink on the cards and make it look like an accident. The casino will pull those two aces out of the game and replace them with two new aces. Then, every time I cut the cards, I'll be able to see where the two new aces are," says BC referring to the fact that the edges of those cards will look newer and cleaner than others in the deck or decks. "I would sit there, cut to aces and bet big on that one hand per shoe."

That said, BC gets up. He's poised to spend the night pursuing his adversaries in the casino, and it's clear that there's no place he would rather be. ♦

Michael Kaplan is a CIGAR AFICIONADO contributing editor.

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GREUBEL FORSEY
SIGNATURE 1

THE HEAD TURNERS IN TIME

Daring to be different
in a watch climate
dominated by safe bets,
these 10 watches turned
on bold new movements
and striking design

BY LAURIE KAHLE

The outlook at this year's Swiss watch fairs was decidedly gloomy. Even before summer's historic Brexit decision that threw markets into turmoil, global economic conditions had cast a pall upon the overstocked luxury watch market. Accordingly, the tendency was to retreat to the safe havens of classic design and revamped tried-and-true models. The watches that stood out, however, were the few which still dared to break records, flout convention and part from the crowd.

GREUBEL FORSEY SIGNATURE 1

Best known for its audacious and highly technical tourbillons at stratospheric prices, Greubel Forsey surprised us this year with a three-hand watch that expresses the purity of timekeeping while showcasing the brand's superlative quality and finishing.

The Signature collection will evolve with timepieces envisioned by a single watchmaker seeking to express the Greubel Forsey philosophy, while drawing upon the significantly skilled resources of the atelier. Signature 1 is the brainchild of Didier Cretin, an accomplished Greubel Forsey team member, who co-signs each Signature 1 with Stephen Forsey and Robert Greubel. They will produce 11 pieces each in platinum, white gold, and rose gold, plus an "entry level" Greubel Forsey limited to 33 pieces in stainless steel (150,000 Swiss francs, or about \$153,000).

The off-center dial may be reminiscent of the brand's GMT, but Signature 1 projects a much more classical tone, despite the lower section of the dial being left open to show off the traditional balance wheel and interior architecture of the movement. As it is the first Greubel Forsey without a tourbillon regulator, the piece is by far the least expensive in the collection. Still it is among the world's most expensive three-hand watches ... and one that is sure to sell out. greubelforsey.com

BVLGARI OCTO FINISSIMO MINUTE REPEATER



AUDEMARS PIGUET ROYAL OAK DOUBLE
BALANCE WHEEL OPENWORKED



PATEK PHILIPPE WORLD TIME
CHRONOGRAPH REF. 5930



A. LANGE & SÖHNE RICHARD
LANGE JUMPING SECONDS



ROLEX
AIR-KING

BULGARI OCTO FINISSIMO MINUTE REPEATER

Bulgari broke a record with the world's thinnest minute repeater, the Octo Finissimo Minute Repeater (\$155,000), which marks the pinnacle of the Finissimo collection of ultrathin watches. Bulgari's engineers set out to build a minute repeater for the modern age, rather than one that celebrates tradition. The minute repeater is a complication that predates electricity. It chimes the hours, quarter hours and minutes on a series of tiny wire gongs that are struck with miniature hammers on demand.

As musical watches usually rely on case volume for sound resonance, building an ultrathin minute repeater is unprecedented. Instead, Bulgari cut away the indexes on the dial to allow the sound to transmit through the dial. Titanium was also selected for the case and dial material because its properties make it superior for sound propagation, while steel was used for the gongs for the same reason. Another goal was to create a minute repeater for everyday wear rather than one that would sit in a vault most of the time. Measuring a mere 6.85 mm, the svelte sandblasted titanium case with its cutting-edge angles brings a disruptive contemporary attitude to the historically revered complication. bulgari.com

AUDEMARS PIGUET ROYAL OAK DOUBLE BALANCE WHEEL OPENWORKED

Audemars Piguet's Royal Oak Concept Supersonnerie, which hits the market this year, also set a minute repeater record: the world's loudest. But that technology comes at an incredibly steep price—more than a half million dollars. However, Audemars Piguet released another groundbreaking technical achievement in a Royal Oak that flipped the typical script that says

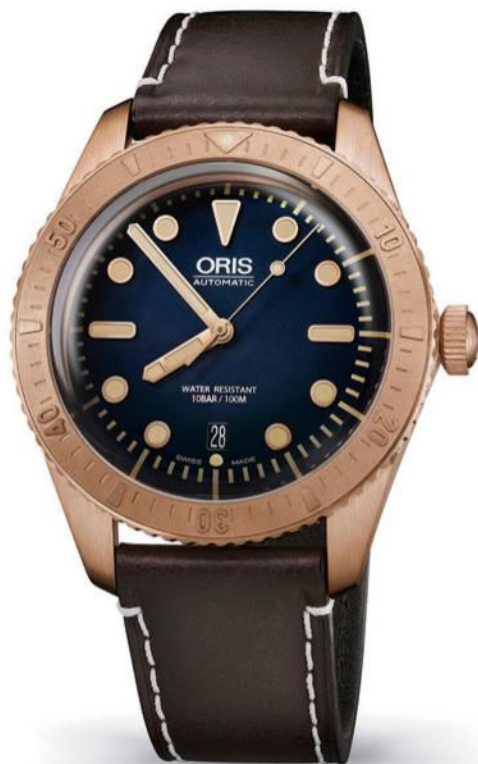
watchmakers usually launch significant advancements in their highest-end watches before filtering the technology down through the collection. The 41-mm Royal Oak Double Balance Wheel Openworked (\$44,100 in stainless steel) achieves heightened chronometric stability for a 30 percent increase in precision by adding a second balance wheel and balance spring assembly that is fixed on the same axis. The patented movement is showcased with Audemars Piguet's exceptional skeletonization, an art form for which the brand has been celebrated for decades. audemarspiguet.com

PATEK PHILIPPE WORLD TIME CHRONOGRAPH REF. 5930

In the new World Time Chronograph Ref. 5930 (\$73,700), which is inspired by a unique piece from 1940, Patek Philippe combined two of its most prized complications: a chronograph and world time function.

The piece joins the world-time module, a concept originally developed by Louis Cottier in the 1930s, to the self-winding CH 28-520 PS chronograph caliber with column wheel and a vertical clutch. By making extensive modifications, Patek Philippe has created the new CH 28-520 HU movement.

One may expect the first casualties of such a fusion would be legibility and elegance. But the dial retains the classic layout of Patek world timers with a two-tone, 24-hour ring (to indicate night versus day) paired with the city ring around the periphery of the dial, representing the world's 24 primary time zones. A simple push on the button at 10 o'clock allows you to adjust zones while keeping track of time around the globe. In between these two rings is the seconds scale for the flyback chronograph that pairs with a 30-minute counter in a sub-dial at 6 o'clock to track elapsing time. And because the chronograph hand is powered by a vertical clutch, it can



ORIS CARL BRASHEAR
LIMITED EDITION



VACHERON CONSTANTIN
OVERSEAS CHRONOGRAPH



LAURENT FERRIER
GALLET SQUARE BORÉAL

double as a permanently running seconds hand without risking wear and tear or diminishing accuracy and power reserve.

At a streamlined 39.5 mm in diameter and 12 mm thick, Patek Philippe managed to deliver all that functionality in a refined 18-karat white gold package with winglet-style strap lugs, a distinguishing design flourish of its 1940s and 1950s World Time watches. patek.com

A. LANGE & SÖHNE RICHARD LANGE JUMPING SECONDS

Once again, the German watchmaker dazzled this year with high complications such as the Datograph Perpetual Tourbillon—combining a flyback chronograph, perpetual calendar and tourbillon. But the platinum Richard Lange Jumping Seconds (78,000 euros, or about \$86,000) caught our eye for its unconventional spirit. Limited to 100 pieces, the Jumping Seconds is the third Richard Lange model to exhibit a triangular-shaped regulator dial design with three subdials (one for hours, another for minutes and the largest for seconds) paired with a constant force device for enhanced timekeeping. The Jumping Seconds regulates at one-second intervals to make the dominant seconds hand jump rather than sweep around the dial like most mechanical watches. An elegant zero-reset system synchronizes everything when you pull the crown. alange-soehne.com

ROLEX AIR-KING

As watch enthusiasts gushed over the new steel Daytona with a black Cerachrom ceramic bezel, Rolex's retooled Air-King (\$6,200) stole some of the leading man's spotlight this year. This upsized 40-mm

904L steel incarnation of the 1950s-era pilot watch swaggers with a black dial marked with a mix of large hour digits and smaller minute digits inspired by '40s-era military cockpit instruments, plus a prominent minute track around the periphery. The dial is also embellished with a yellow crown, the green Rolex logo, plus a vintage Air-King logo in a nod to the model's historical roots. The piece is also labeled as a Superlative Chronometer, attesting to Rolex's stringent testing for high-precision performance. And like the Milgauss, the movement is protected from omnipresent magnetic fields with a soft-iron inner case. rolex.com

ORIS CARL BRASHEAR LIMITED EDITION

Oris also went retro with a limited-edition dive watch that pays homage to Carl Brashear, the first African-American to achieve master diver status in the U.S. Navy. Cuba Gooding Jr. famously portrayed Brashear in the 2000 film *Men of Honor*. Not only did Brashear face intense racial discrimination when he joined the navy in 1948 at the age of 17, he lost the lower part of his left leg in a 1966 accident while trying to salvage a hydrogen bomb. Yet, he continued diving as an amputee.

In a nod to material used for deep-sea diving helmets in the 1950s, Oris cased the 42 mm Carl Brashear Limited Edition (\$2,800) in bronze, which develops a distinctive patina as it ages, making each of the 2,000 watches unique. The retro aesthetic with a deep blue dial was borrowed from last year's Divers Sixty-Five. And as you might expect, the watch is water-resistant down to 100 meters. Proceeds from sales will benefit the Carl Brashear Foundation. oris.ch

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AROMA

Heavy oak bouquet, followed by leather and dried fruit - reminiscent of well-aged molasses spirit.

TASTE

Long-aged wood with rich tannin notes and rich rummy essence. Finishes long and easy.

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VACHERON CONSTANTIN OVERSEAS CHRONOGRAPH

Vacheron Constantin also revisited a contemporary classic—its travel-inspired Overseas sport-watch collection with a redesign and five new Geneva Seal models, including the 42.5-mm Overseas Chronograph available in stainless steel (\$28,900) or 18-karat rose gold (\$49,000) with a choice of gray or blue dials. Last updated in 2004, the Overseas originally launched in the 1970s with three other legendary sport watches that were designed by Gerald Genta that carry on to this day: Audemars Piguet's Royal Oak, Patek Philippe's Nautilus and IWC's Ingenieur SL.

Vacheron spent five years developing the watch's engine, the finely finished automatic Calibre 5200, with 263 components including a column wheel and vertical coupling clutch to ensure smooth action. A sapphire-crystal case back reveals the movement with a 22-karat-gold oscillating weight engraved with a compass rose, a historic symbol that helps travelers find their bearings.

The slightly tweaked Overseas case design is a rounded tonneau shape with a round dial surrounded by a bezel sculpted with six notches. The integrated bracelet is easily changed thanks to a new system that requires no tools. The steel model comes with a steel bracelet plus alternate rubber and alligator straps, so you can change the look of your Overseas in an instant. vacheron-constantin.com

LAURENT FERRIER GALET SQUARE BORÉAL

Laurent Ferrier arrived on the Swiss watch scene in 2010 with its signature Galet collection (*galet* means pebble in French), fusing classical and contemporary aesthetic codes. Over the past six years, the boutique brand has evolved its flagship line into the cushion-shaped Galet Square. This year's upsized (41 mm by 41 mm) Galet Square Boréal (\$38,000) infuses this supremely elegant watch with an Art Deco look by appointing it with a simplified sector dial reminiscent of watches from the 1930s. The chapter ring and arrow-shaped hands are treated with Superluminova so they light up in the dark.

Under the chic dial is the first movement the brand developed in-house. The automatic FBN 229.01 calibre is equipped with a unidirectional pawl-fitted micro-rotor that efficiently winds to deliver the

watch's three-day power reserve. The movement features a silicon escapement and two escape wheels to produce a double direct impulse on the balance, maximizing energy efficiency and performance. This cutting edge movement is painstakingly finished with the traditional Côtes de Genève motif on the bridges, circular graining on the main plate, and other fine touches—all of which are visible through the sapphire-crystal case back. laurentferrier.ch



**TAG HEUER CARRERA
HEUER-02T TOURBILLON**

TAG HEUER CARRERA HEUER-02T TOURBILLON

Part of the tourbillon's historic allure is its rarity and exclusivity. Before 21st-century advances in watchmaking technology, simply achieving a tourbillon was a badge of pride. Tourbillons (rotating cages that contain the escapement and balance wheel to counter the effects of gravity) used to be exceedingly uncommon and priced accordingly steep—often \$50,000 to \$100,000 and up. But TAG Heuer has turned that notion on its head with the industrialized Carrera Heuer-02T. The COSC-certified automatic chronograph is combined with a titanium and carbon flying tourbillon with a power reserve in excess of 65 hours. What really stopped us in our tracks was the price, starting at \$15,900 in titanium.

TAG Heuer rethought every step from the way the mechanism is built to the machinery used to the time a watchmaker spends on assembling and adjusting the watch. Jean-Claude Biver, TAG Heuer's CEO, likens the new process to building with Legos, where the elements fit together solidly and seamlessly, so no time-consuming watchmaker adjustments are required. When you minimize the labor hours, the price naturally falls.

The watch traces its aesthetic codes to the Carrera Heuer-01 and its movement to the CH-80 chronograph fitted with a lightweight tourbillon inspired by the Monaco V4's tourbillon.

Of course you cannot expect a \$16,000 tourbillon to have the fine finish and other hallmarks of extreme quality of watches costing many times more, but this edgy tourbillon makes the revered complication accessible to a wider audience and a younger generation of collectors who admire the mesmerizing spinning wheel but never dreamed of actually wearing one. tagheuer.com ❖

Laurie Kahle writes frequently for CIGAR AFICIONADO on watches and travel.

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Auchentoshan	Bushmills	Glengoyne	Johnnie Walker	Penderyn	Westland
Bacardi	Calumet	GlenGlassaugh	Kavalan	Pike Creek	WhistlePig
Bains	Cardenal Mendoza	Glenkinchi	Kilbeggan	Pikesville Rye	Wild Turkey
Baker's	Cardhu	The Glenlivet	Kinahan's	Quiet Man	Woodford Reserve
Balblair	Compass Box	Glenmorangie	Knappogue	Rebel Yell	Wyoming
The Balvenie	Connemara	Goose Island	Knob Creek	Redbreast	Yamazaki
Barrell Bourbon	Cooper & Thief	Grand Macnish	Lagavulin	Redemption	Yellow Spot
Basil Hayden	Coppersea Distilling	Greenore	Laphroaig	Rough Rider	Yellowstone
BenRiach	Crown Royal	Green Spot	Larceny	Russell's Reserve	
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Ratings & Reviews

REVIEW | Fuente Fuente OpusX Lost City Piramide

93
POINTS

 DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

 52

 MEDIUM-FULL



Tasting Note: A slightly pressed torpedo whose lush, full draw imparts a rich, sweet smoke replete with notes of baking spices and raisins. An earthiness emerges along with notes of caramel and almond. Complex and delicious.

Body: Medium-Full **Size:** Figurado **Ring Gauge:** 52
Length: 6 3/8" **Filler:** Dom. Rep. **Binder:** Dom. Rep. **Wrapper:** Dom. Rep.
Issue: Cigar Aficionado, Apr 01, 2016 **Price:** \$31.00

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There are no additional reviews of this cigar.

Cigar Aficionado's 100-Point Scale
Classic: 95-100
Outstanding: 90-94
Very good to excellent: 80-89
Average to good commercial quality: 70-79
Don't waste your money: 0-69

Registered users can add this cigar to a personal humidor.

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Ratings & Reviews

REVIEW | Quai d'Orsay Robusto Diplomatico Exclusivo Francia

91
POINTS

 CUBA

 48

 MEDIUM



Tasting Note: With a near-perfect burn and lush draw, this robusto starts with almond and nutmeg intonations and develops a molasses and cinnamon sweetness.

Body: Medium **Size:** Robusto **Ring Gauge:** 48 **Length:** 5"
Filler: Cuba **Binder:** Cuba **Wrapper:** Cuba
Issue: Cigar Aficionado, Apr 01, 2016 **Price:** €9.80
Box Date: Aug. 2015

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More Reviews of This Cigar
Issue: Cigar Insider, Jan 05, 2016
Score: 91
With a near-perfect burn and lush draw, this robusto starts with almond and nutmeg intonations and develops a molasses and cinnamon sweetness.

Cigar Aficionado's 100-Point Scale
Classic: 95-100
Outstanding: 90-94
Very good to excellent: 80-89
Average to good commercial quality: 70-79
Don't waste your money: 0-69

Registered users can add this cigar to a personal humidor.

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Ratings & Reviews

REVIEW | Alec Bradley Nica Puro Rosado Torpedo

91
POINTS

 NICARAGUA

 54

 MEDIUM-FULL



Tasting Note: A torpedo that starts toasty with a note of cocoa powder but develops a rich, sweeter character, taking on elements of honey, wood and nuts.

Body: Medium-Full **Size:** Figurado **Ring Gauge:** 54
Length: 6 1/4" **Filler:** Nicaragua **Binder:** Nicaragua **Wrapper:** Nicaragua
Issue: Cigar Aficionado, Feb 01, 2016 **Price:** \$8.00

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More Reviews of This Cigar
Issue: Cigar Insider, Dec 01, 2015
Score: 91
A torpedo that starts toasty with a note of cocoa powder but develops a rich, sweeter character, taking on elements of honey, wood and nuts.

Cigar Aficionado's 100-Point Scale
Classic: 95-100
Outstanding: 90-94
Very good to excellent: 80-89
Average to good commercial quality: 70-79
Don't waste your money: 0-69

Registered users can add this cigar to a personal humidor.

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A Rumbunctious PAIRING

Aged rums are
a natural partner
for handmade cigars

BY JACK BETTRIDGE
PHOTOGRAPH BY JEFF HARRIS

Rum is sometimes overlooked as a cigar partner, but the two are a sweet tasting natural pairing. Their ingredients—sugar cane in the case of rum, tobacco for handmade cigars—hail from similar, if not identical, regions. Forgo the clear rum you may remember from your youth and look instead to dark, aged rums, one of the fastest-growing segments in the category. More good rums are available than ever before, and some producers are even mimicking whiskey-making

methods like special wood finishes. We tested some of the best rums on the market against a pair of very different cigars. The Alec Bradley Connecticut Torpedo (rated 88 points in the June 2015 CIGAR AFICIONADO, \$8.00) represented a milder smoke, with tastes of cream, tea, orange and a woody finish. The Oliva Serie V Torpedo (88 points, August 2015, \$9.32) was at the full-bodied end of the spectrum, with notes of nuts, leather, maple and dried fruit.



Appleton Estate 21

Jamaica's Appleton follows strict English rules, which insist a rum's label reflect the minimum age used in a blend. Surprisingly, this 21-year-old is not the oldest the estate has made (that was a 50-year-old). Specially chosen yeast gives it full body, with huge notes of apple, banana and pear, joined by licorice and cinnamon. Its voluptuousness was a bit much for the Alec Bradley, but paired with the Oliva the rum brought out loads of leather and coffee notes as well as its signature orange flavor. (86 proof, \$134)

Cockspur VSOR 12

Getting wider U.S. distribution, this brand is blended from molasses rums made at the West Indies Rum Distillery on the beach in Barbados. Its VSOR (Very Special Old Reserve) melds the facility's oldest pot- and column-still spirits. Flavors of bread dough join with allspice, ginger, molasses and banana. Cockspur worked well with both cigars, finding spices and a bit of sweetness in the Alec Bradley while profiting from the cigar's creamy smoke. The rum took on leather and wood from the Oliva and gave back hints of banana. (80 proof, \$30)

Cruzan Single Barrel Distiller's Collection

Made in St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands, Cruzan holds the odd distinction of being the only rum on the American Whiskey Trail. This extra-aged example blends samples from five to 12 years old. Exhibiting the orange notes of a triple sec as well as cinnamon and licorice, it woke up the rich wood possibilities of the Alec Bradley's finish and took on some extra spice and orange. It did even better with the Oliva, imparting cocoa and white chocolate to the cigar and getting a hearty character in return. (80 proof, \$30)



We paired 18 superb rums with a pair of quite different smokes, the relatively mild Alec Bradley Connecticut (top) and the bold Oliva Serie V.

Diplomático Reserva Exclusiva

A pot-stilled rum made at the foot of the Andes Mountains in Venezuela with spirit as old as 12 years, this Diplomático mixes notes of butterscotch, nuts, brown sugar and vanilla with tutti-frutti, but without being effusive. While not a clash, it tends to run in cross direction to the Alec Bradley, even while the cigar gained from its sweetness. The Oliva brought chocolate and molasses to the Diplomático, while becoming more leathery. The rum's maple popped and sweetened the cigar. (80 proof, \$40)

Don Q Gran Añejo

This Puerto Rican rum is distilled at the Serralés distillery, which dates to the 19th Century, but was rebuilt after Prohibition. The Gran Añejo is less dry than the island's typical style. It issues caramel and vanilla flavors,



but also has ample sugar and spice. The Alec Bradley's tea and orange played into that hand and the cigar got back a woody lift. Leather and barrel flavors were the stars in the Oliva pairing. (80 proof, \$60)

Dove Tale

This Florida rum from John Drew, (the spirits venture from the cofounder of Drew Estate Cigar Company) is made with molasses from cane grown in the Everglades. It smacks of butter-rum candy and caramel with hints of spice and grapefruit. The Alec Bradley opened it up quite a bit, lending the rum chocolate notes. The cigar got smoother and sweeter in return. The Oliva also found chocolate in the rum, as well as heightening its citrus. The cigar became earthier for its troubles. (80 proof, \$35)

Eximo Facundo

Part of Bacardi's extra premium Facundo collection, Eximo was created to celebrate the rum maker's 150th anniversary. Made in Puerto Rico (with Cuban heritage), Eximo is blended with medium- and full-bodied rums before being aged 10 to 12 years. The result is a combination of vanilla and maple overlaid with walnut and pralines that sparked similar flavors in the Alec Bradley, becoming brandy-like at the same time. Mounds of fruitiness materialized on the rum when sipped with the Oliva, while the cigar took on chocolate and fruit notes as well. (80 proof, \$60)

Flor de Caña Centenario 18

A Nicaraguan single-estate rum, Flor de Caña stresses its volcanic soil and slow aging. The spirit is accordingly sweet and full, yet complex. It mingles creamy vanilla and honey with spice and pine notes. The vanilla grew with the Alec Bradley as the cigar got nuttier. The rum really found its stride with the Oliva, becoming very lush with exaggerated honey and cream. The Flor de Caña also boosted the cigar's leather. (80 proof, \$50)

Havana Club Añejo Clásico

The prerevolution owner of Havana Club sold its original recipe to Bacardi, which now distills the brand in Puerto Rico. A recent relaunch includes



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Añejo Clásico, which features lots of heady spice—eucalyptus, mint, even some peat—conjoined with maple and banana. The Alec Bradley was little changed by the rum, but added to its spice. The smoke on the Havana Club played well with the Oliva, while the rum became tangier. (80 proof, \$22)

Mount Gay Black Barrel

Mount Gay is the world's oldest rum brand, made from local cane in Barbados. This small-batch edition gets a finish in deep-charred Bourbon barrels, explaining its name and providing plenty of oak tempered by berries and cocoa. The Black Barrel added a couple of belt notches to the body of the Alec Bradley, while taking on some spicy flavors itself. Woods were the hero in the Oliva union, with chocolate notes from the Mount Gay coming to the fore. (86 proof, \$30)

Papa's Pilar 24

Sources for this blend include the Caribbean, Central America and Florida. Finished in Sherry casks, it contains pot- and column-stilled rums that have been solera aged. The upshot is deep molasses, cinnamon graham cracker and loads of vanilla. The Alec Bradley pairing had a candy-bar quality with plenty of toffee, while the cigar offered its toasty notes. Another confectionary pairing happened with the Oliva, this time with the rum taking on some lime. (86 proof, \$40)

Plantation O.F.T.D. Overproof

The initials mean Old Fashioned Traditional Dark, but its outstanding feature is having one of the highest proofs in aged rum. Behind the alcohol blast are ripe apples, bananas and the fusel oils of Islay Scotch in this surprisingly nuanced blend. What might have been a clash with the Alec

Bradley was a sublime marriage, especially with banana and cream. Then again, the pairing with the Oliva squelched some of the fruity nuances of the rum, even while its whisky notes were underlined. (138 proof, \$32)

The Real McCoy Aged 12 Years

Also hailing from the West Indies Rum Distillery of Barbados, the Real McCoy builds on the legend of Bill McCoy, a Prohibition-era rumrunner known for unadulterated product sold outside the three-mile limit. Buttered rum, caramel and Bourbon notes mingle with Christmas spice. The Alec Bradley showcased its spice, while filling out itself, but the Oliva fought a bit with the McCoy, creating tannin notes in the rum. (80 proof, \$45)

Rhum Barbancourt 15

Founded by transplants from France who employed their homeland's Cognac methods, Haiti's Barbancourt is made from sugar cane juice and smacks of caramel, maple candy and a grocery list of herbs and spices including mint, cinnamon, basil and licorice. Puffs of the Alec Bradley gave Barbancourt's oldest expression a woodier demeanor, while the rum drew spice from the cigar. The Oliva overran the spices of the Barbancourt, but its own leather notes were enhanced. (86 proof, \$45)

Ron Abuelo XV Oloroso Sherry Cask Finish

This is one of three finished rums produced by the Varela Hermanos Distillery, all made with juice from cane grown in its own fields in Panama. With its finish, the Sherry Cask is aged up to 15 years and has a coffee bouquet that proceeds to maple, caramel and spicy nutmeg on the finish. The Alec Bradley became very cedary, but had little influence on the rum. A better give-and-take happened with the Oliva: the rum's coffee found focus and its maple gave a candy note to the cigar. (80 proof, \$70)

Ron Zacapa Centenario 23 Years

Zacapa is made in Guatemala from a first pressing of local sugar cane. The distillate is transferred to cooler, high-altitude facilities, where it is aged in the solera system in a series of cask types. It is thick and sweet with notes of toffee, vanilla, citrus and licorice. The conjunction with the Alec Bradley revealed cinnamon and licorice on both parties, while the cigar took on cedar. The Oliva amped up the Zacapa's barrel notes and teased out nuts and toasts, while getting welcome sweetness. (80 proof, \$40)

Zafra 30 Master Series

Zafra's newest release is a very limited edition made from batching 30-year-old rums. Full of vanilla and molasses, it also features Christmas spice, banana, strawberry, licorice and cinnamon. The rum made a surprisingly agile pairing with the lighter-bodied cigar, adding its sweetness and spice, while taking on a pleasant toast. Vanilla and banana highlighted the marriage with the Oliva, the Zafra giving the cigar ample sweetness and becoming very hearty in the deal. (80 proof, \$200)

Zaya Gran Reserva 12 Year Old

Made with black strap molasses in column stills, this Trinidadian rum includes 18-year-old spirit in its minimum 12-year blend. Quite sugary and dark, with berry fruits and some pear, it showed off against the cream and orange of the Alec Bradley. Woodiness is the surprise result of pairing it with the Oliva as the cigar became quite nutty. (80 proof, \$26) ♦



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cigars

132

BLIND TASTING

Our panel of cigar-smoking editors assesses the quality of 81 cigars from around the world in a blind taste test, including one smoke that scored 94 points.

146

VINTAGE TASTING

A tasting of cigars from various vintages: one from the 1950s, another rolled just 11 years ago and an old classic that flirted with absolute cigar perfection.

148

MICHAEL CUDLITZ: CIGAR SMOKER, ZOMBIE KILLER

Known for his role as Abraham Ford in the hit show “The Walking Dead,” actor Michael Cudlitz likes to enjoy cigars with friends.

156

A.J. FERNANDEZ—A MAN OF TOBACCO

Cigar maker and tobacco grower, A.J. Fernandez has done in 10 years what would take most people an entire lifetime. He came from Cuba, but found success in Nicaragua.

165

CUBA REPORT: THE NEW PARTAGÁS FACTORY

The Partagás Factory has a new address. While the iconic original building is still open for tourists, cigars are now made in a different facility a short distance away.

JEFF HARRIS

churchills

Ashton and Fuente may have created the ideal medium-bodied cigar with the Ashton Heritage Puro Sol, which scored 92 points. It was the standout entry in this tasting of Churchills, and excelled in its ability to impart a rich and creamy smoke while at the same time delivering a tasty experience with body and distinction. According to Ashton, the company was able to achieve this balance by combining sun-grown Dominican tobaccos in the binder and filler with an Ecuadoran Habano wrapper. ■ Most of the Indonesian-type wrappers you see on premium cigars are grown from Indonesian seeds, but cultivated in other countries. The Romeo y Julieta 1875 Deluxe No. 1 is an exception, made with a wrapper actually grown in Indonesia. The Dominican cigar comes from one of Altadis USA's largest brands, but that's no reason to dismiss it—the cigar scored 91 points. The Oliva Serie O and the Villiger Colorado scored 90 points, and both have a lot in common. They're made in Nicaragua, they contain only Nicaraguan tobaccos and they both retail for less than \$8.



DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
RING GAUGE: 48 LENGTH: 6 3/4"
FILLER: DOM. REP.
BINDER: DOM. REP.
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

ASHTON HERITAGE PURO SOL CHURCHILL

Silky to the touch, this Churchill imparts a rich and chewy smoke that weaves earthy and nutty notes with a touch of salt and a toffee sweetness.
U.S.: \$10.20 U.K.: N/A

92



DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
RING GAUGE: 50 LENGTH: 7"
FILLER: DOM. REP.
BINDER: DOM. REP.
WRAPPER: INDONESIA

ROMEO Y JULIETA 1875 DELUXE NO. 1

A nutty Churchill with sweet nougat notes that frame a sweet-and-spicy core. The draw is lush, the burn, dead even. A tasty and balanced cigar.
U.S.: \$8.07 U.K.: N/A

91



NICARAGUA
RING GAUGE: 50 LENGTH: 7"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: NICARAGUA

OLIVA SERIE O CHURCHILL

The sweet woody notes of this Churchill are balanced by a ginger spiciness and an earthy undertone. The combustion is even, as is the draw.
U.S.: \$7.28 U.K.: N/A

90



NICARAGUA
RING GAUGE: 50 LENGTH: 7"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: NICARAGUA

VILLIGER COLORADO CHURCHILL

Soft earthy notes finesse the palate along with bitter-sweet chocolate, red wine and dried fruit. The finish is toasty with a hint of acidity.
U.S.: \$7.50 U.K.: N/A

90



NICARAGUA
RING GAUGE: 48 LENGTH: 7"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: HONDURAS

ALEC BRADLEY AMERICAN CLASSIC BLEND CHURCHILL

Covered in a streaky wrapper, this Churchill has a woody core complemented by touches of black pepper, orange peel and a floral finish.
U.S.: \$5.90 U.K.: N/A

89



DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

RING GAUGE: 50 LENGTH: 7"
FILLER: DOM. REP., NICARAGUA,
PERU
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: CAMEROON

H. UPMANN VINTAGE CAMEROON CHURCHILL

A predominantly toasty Churchill with a touch of maple sweetness and a dry, woody finish. It draws and burns evenly.
U.S.: \$6.53 U.K.: N/A

89



HONDURAS

RING GAUGE: 48 LENGTH: 7"
FILLER: HONDURAS, DOM. REP.
BINDER: BRAZIL
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

CAMACHO ECUADOR CHURCHILL

There are many soft spots on this Churchill, which has an overly airy draw. The smoke is salty and meaty, and it takes on a mineral quality before developing a minty eucalyptus finish.
U.S.: \$8.75 U.K.: N/A

88



DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

RING GAUGE: 52 LENGTH: 7 3/8"
FILLER: NICARAGUA, DOM. REP.
BINDER: U.S.A./CONN. HABANO
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

PARTAGAS 1845 EXTRA FUERTE DOUBLE CORONA

Large and thick, this heavy-gauge Churchill imparts a combination of earth and cocoa powder with a touch of clove and a minty finish.
U.S.: \$8.29 U.K.: N/A

88



HONDURAS

RING GAUGE: 48 LENGTH: 7"
FILLER: HONDURAS
BINDER: HONDURAS
WRAPPER: HONDURAS

ALADINO CHURCHILL

Initial straw-and-hay notes become more floral and fruity with an underlying woodiness. This Churchill produces an unusually white ash as it burns.
U.S.: \$11.00 U.K.: N/A

87



DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

RING GAUGE: 50 LENGTH: 6 3/4"
FILLER: DOM. REP.
BINDER: DOM. REP.
WRAPPER: U.S.A./CONN. SHADE

ARTURO FUENTE DOUBLE CHATEAU FUENTE

A yellowish cigar with a good draw and creamy smoke full of oak, vanilla bean and lemon zest. Floral notes precede a malty finish. Mild and easy going.
U.S.: \$7.25 U.K.: N/A

87



DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

RING GAUGE: 48 LENGTH: 7"
FILLER: DOM. REP.
BINDER: ECUADOR
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

CUSANO DOMINICAN CONNECTICUT CHURCHILL

This golden-brown Churchill is topped with a round head. It starts out flinty and mineral heavy before picking up earthy, peppery notes, though the finish is acidic.
U.S.: \$5.49 U.K.: N/A

86



DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

RING GAUGE: 48 LENGTH: 7"
FILLER: DOM. REP.
BINDER: DOM. REP.
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

NAT SHERMAN STERLING CHURCHILL

Wrapped in a tan cover leaf and rolled with a rounded head, it's sharp and woody at first with some acidity, but develops notes of cardamom and takes on a slightly sweet finish.
U.S.: \$16.00 U.K.: N/A

85



HONDURAS

RING GAUGE: 48 LENGTH: 7"
FILLER: NICARAGUA, DOM. REP.
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

ROCKY PATEL VINTAGE 1992 CHURCHILL

Slim and squarely pressed, this long Churchill is earthy with heavy mineral notes. The finish is quite bitter.
U.S.: \$9.60 U.K.: N/A

84

corona gordas

The Cuban Partagás alphabet series can be confusing—D4, P2, C3—it's practically a brand within itself. Now there's another letter and number to take note of: E2. The Partagás Serie E No. 2 scored an outstanding 93 points, and is one of the newest additions to the series. Habanos S.A. was able to scale up the impactful blend of the more familiar Serie D No. 4 and put it in the E No. 2, which is longer, fatter and adheres to current trends that are leaning large. Three cigars scored 91: the E.P. Carrillo Selección Oscuro Especial No. 6 from Ernesto Perez-Carrillo; Hammer + Sickle Hermitage No. 1 Toro from Eric Hanson; and Cuba's Hoyo de Monterrey Le Hoyo de San Juan.



CUBA

RING GAUGE: 54 LENGTH: 5 1/2"
FILLER: CUBA
BINDER: CUBA
WRAPPER: CUBA
BOX DATE: JULY 2012

PARTAGÁS SERIE E NO. 2

Crafted with an exemplary three-seam cap, this cigar has a lush draw that folds rich layers of creamy espresso into the palate along with cocoa nibs, nuts and wood.

U.S.: N/A U.K.: £26.78

93



DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

RING GAUGE: 52 LENGTH: 6"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: ECUADOR
WRAPPER: MEXICO

E.P. CARRILLO SELECCIÓN OSCURO ESPECIAL NO. 6

A dark and oily cigar packed solid with earthy, fruity tobacco. It picks up a mineral note as well before a clean finish hinting of cocoa.

U.S.: \$8.00 U.K.: N/A

91



HONDURAS

RING GAUGE: 54 LENGTH: 6"
FILLER: HONDURAS, GERMANY
BINDER: HONDURAS
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

HAMMER + SICKLE HERMITAGE NO. 1 TORO

Sweet and earthy with notes of bittersweet chocolate, cocoa and coffee bean layered upon a nutty core. The burn and draw remain even.

U.S.: \$8.99 U.K.: N/A

91



CUBA

RING GAUGE: 54 LENGTH: 5 7/8"
FILLER: CUBA
BINDER: CUBA
WRAPPER: CUBA
BOX DATE: JUNE 2015

HOYO DE MONTERREY LE HOYO DE SAN JUAN (TUBO)

A thick cigar wrapped in an oily cover leaf with a reddish tinge. Floral and citrus notes usher in a leathery smoke with heavy notes of chocolate.

U.S.: N/A U.K.: £26.40

91



DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

RING GAUGE: 54 LENGTH: 6"
FILLER: DOM. REP.
BINDER: DOM. REP.
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

AGING ROOM BIN NO. 1 D MAJOR

Sharply pressed and gleaming with oils, this cigar is full of bold smoked-hickory notes. Hints of crushed black pepper and ground white pepper lead to an unexpected floral finish.

U.S.: \$14.90 U.K.: N/A

90



NICARAGUA

RING GAUGE: 56 LENGTH: 5 1/2"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: MEXICO

MURCIELAGO NOCTURNE

This dark, box-pressed cigar smokes evenly and shows a rich interplay of roasted nuts, oak and toffee notes. The finish is long with a touch of mint.

U.S.: \$9.50 U.K.: N/A

90

**U.S.A.**

RING GAUGE: 52 LENGTH: 6 1/2"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: NICARAGUA

CASA FERNANDEZ MIAMI TORO

Densely rolled with a lot of tobacco, this weighty toro draws well, imparting a tangy, nutty smoke with touches of bittersweet chocolate and raisins.
U.S.: \$8.20 U.K.: N/A

89**NICARAGUA**

RING GAUGE: 50 LENGTH: 6"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: NICARAGUA

ESPADA BY MONTECRISTO GUARD

Initial woodiness and hay-like qualities become heavier and stronger with notes of maple, brown sugar and a spicy citrus finish.
U.S.: \$11.95 U.K.: N/A

89**HONDURAS**

RING GAUGE: 50 LENGTH: 6"
FILLER: NICARAGUA, U.S.A./PENN.
BROADLEAF
BINDER: ECUADOR
WRAPPER: NICARAGUA

HOYO TORO

This oily cigar smokes evenly, delivering strong, spicy notes of red pepper, charcoal and smoked woods. A meaty smoke with a slightly dry finish.
U.S.: \$6.79 U.K.: N/A

89**CUBA**

RING GAUGE: 46 LENGTH: 5 5/8"
FILLER: CUBA
BINDER: CUBA
WRAPPER: CUBA
BOX DATE: NOVEMBER 2014

H. UPMANN MAGNUM 46

Earthy truffle notes and citrus intonations come through the even draw of this flat-headed corona gorda. There's a touch of sweetness on the finish.
U.S.: N/A U.K.: £18.05

88**DOMINICAN REPUBLIC**

RING GAUGE: 50 LENGTH: 6"
FILLER: DOM. REP., NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

MONTECRISTO GRUPO DE MAESTROS PRIVATE BATCH II TORO

Draped in a matte-brown, slightly toothy wrapper, this cigar burns a bit unevenly, but showcases a leathery, mineral character with a bit of cedar and a charry finish.
U.S.: \$15.00 U.K.: N/A

88**DOMINICAN REPUBLIC**

RING GAUGE: 50 LENGTH: 6"
FILLER: DOM. REP., NICARAGUA
BINDER: DOM. REP.
WRAPPER: HONDURAS

FONSECA CUBANO LIMITADO TORO

Dark and oily with a bumpy head, this is a predominantly earthy-tasting smoke with notes of truffle, salt and black pepper, but the cigar refused to burn evenly.
U.S.: \$7.75 U.K.: N/A

87**DOMINICAN REPUBLIC**

RING GAUGE: 46 LENGTH: 6"
FILLER: DOM. REP.
BINDER: DOM. REP.
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

POR LARRAÑAGA GRAN CORONA

A lightly hued corona gorda topped with many uneven seams at the head. Its smoke is creamy, with some hints of lemon peel on the finish.
U.S.: \$8.50 U.K.: N/A

87**DOMINICAN REPUBLIC**

RING GAUGE: 52 LENGTH: 6"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

RAMON ALLONES HERITAGE SERIES 652

Rollled with a large knotted pigtail and uncut foot, this cigar smokes fairly evenly. It's an earthy, woody smoke with traces of minerals and sweetness. Rustic in character.
U.S.: \$6.99 U.K.: N/A

87

double coronas

There are a number of plausible reasons why cigar smokers see fewer and fewer double coronas on retailer shelves. For starters, the large size requires an unusually large and pristine cover leaf, which can be difficult to procure. And smoking duration requires more than an hour. Should you find the time for one of these extended-period cigars, it would be difficult to do better than the Fuente Fuente OpusX Double Corona, which scored 92 points. At nearly 8 inches long, it's more than just a cigar, it's a long journey of dynamic tobacco that intensifies and crescendos with varying degrees of zest, spice and sweetness. The wrapper is a supreme expression of Chateau de La Fuente, the tobacco farm in the Dominican Republic where this rare cover leaf is grown. Though called an "A" by Padrón's naming convention, we consider the Padrón 1964 Anniversary Series "A" a double corona (just missing "A" status by a quarter inch). The cigar scored 91 points for its rich earthiness tempered by sweet contrasts. The Edge Lite, from Rocky Patel, also scored 91 points, and at just under \$8, it's a considerable bargain, especially for a cigar so large.



DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
RING GAUGE: 49 LENGTH: 7 5/8"
FILLER: DOM. REP.
BINDER: DOM. REP.
WRAPPER: DOM. REP.

**FUENTE FUENTE OPUSX
DOUBLE CORONA**
A well-rolled double corona with traces of cinnamon and candied fruit that intensify to a cedary and spicy smoke with a zesty finish that smacks of orange peel.
U.S.: \$17.60 U.K.: N/A

92



NICARAGUA
RING GAUGE: 50 LENGTH: 8 1/4"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: NICARAGUA

PADRÓN 1964 ANNIVERSARY SERIES "A"
Long, dark and elegantly pressed with a lush draw. It's an earthy cigar that develops a brown sugar sweetness, hints of leather and a dried cherry finish.
U.S.: \$33.80 U.K.: N/A

91



HONDURAS
RING GAUGE: 52 LENGTH: 7 1/2"
FILLER: HONDURAS, NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

THE EDGE LITE DOUBLE CORONA
A sweet and spicy double corona with hints of citrus and a floral finish. The smoke is dense in texture and the cigar draws quite consistently.
U.S.: \$7.70 U.K.: N/A

91



HONDURAS
RING GAUGE: 50 LENGTH: 7 1/2"
FILLER: HONDURAS, DOM. REP.,
NICARAGUA
BINDER: U.S.A./CONN. BROADLEAF
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

PUNCH GRAND CRU DIADEMAS
This large, lush cigar begins wheaty in tone with some baking spices, and progresses to an earthy smoke complemented by dried fruit notes.
U.S.: \$7.99 U.K.: N/A

90



CUBA
RING GAUGE: 49 LENGTH: 7 5/8"
FILLER: CUBA
BINDER: CUBA
WRAPPER: CUBA
BOX DATE: NOVEMBER 2015

RAMON ALLONES GIGANTES
A primarily floral cigar with hints of wood, cinnamon and a vanilla bean finish. It's constructed with a neat, three-seam cap and flat head.
U.S.: N/A U.K.: £26.51

90

**DOMINICAN REPUBLIC**

RING GAUGE: 54 LENGTH: 7 1/2"
FILLER: DOM. REP.
BINDER: DOM. REP.
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

ASHTON VIRGIN SUN GROWN SPELLBOUND

Large, dark and imposing with softly pressed edges and an oily wrapper. The first puffs are a bit waxy, but the cigar becomes earthy, taking on notes of coffee bean, minerals and a cardamom finish.

U.S.: \$14.50 U.K.: N/A

89

**HONDURAS**

RING GAUGE: 50 LENGTH: 7 1/2"
FILLER: NICARAGUA, HONDURAS
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

HERITAGE BY DUNHILL CHURCHILL

Gleaming with oils, this dark Churchill exhibits the salty, bread quality of a warm pretzel. Some nutty notes come through as well, but the minty finish seems out of place.

U.S.: \$12.55 U.K.: N/A

89

**CUBA**

RING GAUGE: 49 LENGTH: 7 5/8"
FILLER: CUBA
BINDER: CUBA
WRAPPER: CUBA
BOX DATE: FEBRUARY 2015

PUNCH DOUBLE CORONA

Solidly rolled with a firm draw that imparts a somewhat thin draw. The smoke exhibits a combination of floral notes and sweet graham cracker, but the weak draw hurt the score.

U.S.: N/A U.K.: £26.85

89

**DOMINICAN REPUBLIC**

RING GAUGE: 50 LENGTH: 7 1/2"
FILLER: HONDURAS, NICARAGUA,
COLOMBIA
BINDER: INDONESIA
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

VEGAFINA CHURCHILL

Mild and woody, this large cigar offers notes of straw and hay as well as hints of graham cracker and citrus. Woodiness recurs on the finish.

U.S.: \$6.40 U.K.: N/A

88

**DOMINICAN REPUBLIC**

RING GAUGE: 50 LENGTH: 7 1/2"
FILLER: DOM. REP.
BINDER: DOM. REP.
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

**DAVIDOFF COLORADO CLARO
DOUBLE "R"**

The ash of this large double corona splits as the cigar smokes, but the draw is ample, offering notes of black tea, fresh tobacco as well as damp earth and mushroom.

U.S.: \$32.20 U.K.: N/A

87

**DOMINICAN REPUBLIC**

RING GAUGE: 50 LENGTH: 8"
FILLER: DOM. REP.
BINDER: DOM. REP.
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

**DIAMOND CROWN MAXIMUS DOUBLE
CORONA NO. 1**

A tangy, earthy double corona with an even draw and burn. Sweet hints of brown sugar come through before the slightly dry finish.

U.S.: \$19.20 U.K.: N/A

87

**NICARAGUA**

RING GAUGE: 54 LENGTH: 7 1/2"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: U.S.A./CONN. BROADLEAF

LA AROMA DE CUBA DOUBLE CORONA

The firm draw of this dark double corona imparts a nutty smoke with notes of almonds and a spicy, charcoal finish.

U.S.: \$6.75 U.K.: N/A

87

**DOMINICAN REPUBLIC**

RING GAUGE: 49 LENGTH: 7 1/2"
FILLER: DOM. REP., MEXICO
BINDER: MEXICO
WRAPPER: U.S.A./CONN. BROADLEAF

MACANUDO MADURO PRINCE PHILIP

Crafted with a notably rounded head, this ink-black Churchill delivers touches of licorice and pepper as well as bread notes and a slightly bitter woody finish.

U.S.: \$8.39 U.K.: N/A

87

figurados

The casual fan of Cuban cigars most likely thinks of sizes other than the Belicoso any time the Romeo y Julieta brand is mentioned. Over time, it's gotten lost in the shuffle of new releases and trendier shapes. The Belicoso often scores very well within our tastings, but this is the first time it ever reached 94 points—the highest score in the entire issue. Note that these particular samples of exemplary Belicosos came from a box with an October 2015 production date. Known for humidors, Daniel Marshall is also a cigar brand, and the namesake Daniel Marshall Red Label Torpedo scored 92 points along with another Belicoso, the My Father No. 2.



CUBA

ROMEO Y JULIETA BELICOSO

RING GAUGE: 52 LENGTH: 5 1/2"
FILLER: CUBA
BINDER: CUBA
WRAPPER: CUBA
BOX DATE: OCTOBER 2015

First puffs of this box-pressed belicoso leave sweet and savory impressions of salted caramel, wood and vanilla. Subtle notes of oaked red wine make this a very complex smoke.
U.S.: N/A U.K.: £19.38

94



NICARAGUA

DANIEL MARSHALL RED LABEL TORPEDO BOX-AGED 1 YEAR

RING GAUGE: 54 LENGTH: 6 1/4"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: NICARAGUA

The chocolate-hued wrapper of this cigar foreshadows its rich array of confectioner's notes from light cocoa and coconut shavings to German chocolate cake. Elegant and balanced.
U.S.: \$8.90 U.K.: N/A

92



NICARAGUA

MY FATHER NO. 2 BELICOSO

RING GAUGE: 54 LENGTH: 5 1/2"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

A beautifully rolled cigar crafted with a belicoso tip and oily wrapper. Sweet tea and cedar notes intensify to spicy, piquant cinnamon on top of sweet marzipan and roasted coffee.
U.S.: \$11.00 U.K.: N/A

92



NICARAGUA

LIGA PRIVADA ÚNICO SERIE FERAL FLYING PIG

RING GAUGE: 60 LENGTH: 5 3/8"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: BRAZIL
WRAPPER: U.S.A./CONN. BROADLEAF

Plump and pigtailed, this dark perfecto starts with an uneven burn that corrects itself. It delivers an earthy, chappy smoke with hints of anise and vanilla bean.
U.S.: \$17.80 U.K.: N/A

91



CUBA

MONTECRISTO OPEN REGATA

RING GAUGE: 46 LENGTH: 5 3/8"
FILLER: CUBA
BINDER: CUBA
WRAPPER: CUBA
BOX DATE: APRIL 2015

Covered in a gritty wrapper with large, visible pores, this small belicoso balances earthy and leathery notes with a vanilla bean sweetness. It tastes better than it looks.
U.S.: N/A U.K.: £15.08

91



CUBA

COHIBA PIRÁMIDES EXTRA

RING GAUGE: 54 LENGTH: 6 1/4"
FILLER: CUBA
BINDER: CUBA
WRAPPER: CUBA
BOX DATE: AUGUST 2015

A large torpedo with a veiny wrapper. The cigar burns evenly, delivering floral notes that intermingle with hints of cashew nuts and a touch of graham cracker.
U.S.: N/A U.K.: £37.31

90



NICARAGUA

RING GAUGE: 58 LENGTH: 6"
FILLER: U.S.A./PENN. BROADLEAF,
HONDURAS, NICARAGUA
BINDER: ECUADOR
WRAPPER: MEXICO

LUCHADOR LOCO PERFECTO

A big perfecto that combines roasted coffee and carob nib notes with nuanced wood and a floral finish. The cigar draws and burns evenly.
U.S.: \$8.60 U.K.: N/A

90



CUBA

RING GAUGE: 57 LENGTH: 7 1/4"
FILLER: CUBA
BINDER: CUBA
WRAPPER: CUBA
BOX DATE: AUGUST 2015

PARTAGÁS SALOMON

Picture-perfect with fine tapers and an alluring wrapper. The foot is packed with tobacco, resulting in a firm draw that eventually opens to show notes of salted caramel, spices and graham cracker finish.
U.S.: N/A U.K.: £26.59

90



NICARAGUA

RING GAUGE: 52 LENGTH: 6 7/8"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: U.S.A./CONN. BROADLEAF

TATUAJE AVION 13

This long, box-pressed perfecto wears an attractive, near-black wrapper. Oaky, earthy notes are complemented by touches of coffee and licorice.
U.S.: \$11.00 U.K.: N/A

90



HONDURAS

RING GAUGE: 58 LENGTH: 6 1/2"
FILLER: HONDURAS, NICARAGUA
BINDER: HONDURAS, NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: HONDURAS

ALEC BRADLEY MUNDIAL NO. 8

A primarily nutty, woody figurado with a tapered nipple foot and a mellow undertone of toast. It's a medium-bodied smoke that burns and draws evenly.
U.S.: \$12.00 U.K.: N/A

89



DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

RING GAUGE: 58 LENGTH: 5"
FILLER: DOM. REP.
BINDER: DOM. REP.
WRAPPER: U.S.A./CONN. SHADE

DIAMOND CROWN TORPEDO NO. 8

Oils are seeping through the wrapper of this fat, golden-brown belicoso. It starts a bit waxy, but picks up a ginger-like spiciness and a touch of graham cracker sweetness.
U.S.: \$12.30 U.K.: N/A

88



DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

RING GAUGE: 50 LENGTH: 4 3/4"
FILLER: DOM. REP.
BINDER: DOM. REP.
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

LA FLOR DOMINICANA LIGERO OSCURO NATURAL CABINET TORPEDITO

A mini torpedo with a dark wrapper and uneven burn. It's a gritty smoke with notes of charcoal, maple and licorice. The finish is a bit dry.
U.S.: \$7.30 U.K.: N/A

88



DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

RING GAUGE: 52 LENGTH: 6 1/8"
FILLER: DOM. REP.
BINDER: DOM. REP.
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

DAVIDOFF MILLENNIUM BLEND SERIES PIRAMIDES

The burn of this medium-claro torpedo starts unevenly, but corrects itself. Notes of earth and bread emerge before hints of almonds and a finish that's both sweet and acidic.
U.S.: \$25.00 U.K.: N/A

87



NICARAGUA

RING GAUGE: 54 LENGTH: 6"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: NICARAGUA

JOYA DE NICARAGUA ANTAÑO DARK COROJO PODEROSO

Near-black in appearance with a very pointy tip. While there are earthy flavors, there is also a heavy charriness and a damp, mushroom-like finish.
U.S.: \$9.40 U.K.: N/A

82

panetelas

A long, thin cigar can prove quite potent and complex. From a blending perspective, it's a wrapper-driven format, meaning that the cover leaf plays a much larger role in the overall character of the smoke on account of the thinner ring gauge and the wrapper-to-filler ratios. In this tasting, these proportions were best achieved with the Illusione hl, which scored 91 points. The hl stands for Holy Lance, an obvious play on the lancero size and also a Biblical reference to the spear that pierced the side of Jesus while he was on the cross. For whatever reason, it's difficult to find a lancero in a Cameroon wrapper, but La Flor Dominicana gives the cigar world this rarity with its Cameroon Cabinet Lancero, which scored 90 points. Though the wrapper itself isn't the most pristine in appearance, it gave this cigar the sweet-and-spicy qualities often associated with tasty Cameroon leaf. The Romeo y Julieta Reserva Real is not billed as a strong or even medium-bodied smoke, but the slim Porto Real scored 90 points nonetheless. It imparted a lot of bright character while maintaining its mild to medium body—not an easy blending achievement.



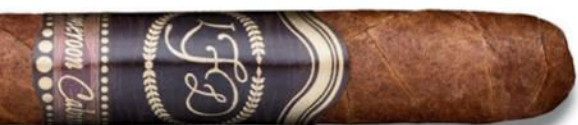
NICARAGUA

RING GAUGE: 40 LENGTH: 7 1/2"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: NICARAGUA

ILLUSIONE HL

The large, visible pores of the cover leaf give this lancero a gritty appearance, but the draw and burn are even and aromatic. It's a meaty smoke balanced by sweet marzipan and buttery mineral notes.
U.S.: \$10.75 U.K.: N/A

91



DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

RING GAUGE: 38 LENGTH: 7 1/2"
FILLER: DOM. REP., NICARAGUA
BINDER: DOM. REP.
WRAPPER: CAMEROON

LA FLOR DOMINICANA CAMEROON CABINET LANCERO

Although very rustic in appearance, this pigtailed lancero imparts a dense, sweet-and-spicy smoke with notes of nougat, crushed peppercorn and a floral finish.
U.S.: \$11.20 U.K.: N/A

90



DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

RING GAUGE: 36 LENGTH: 7"
FILLER: DOM. REP., NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

ROMEO Y JULIETA RESERVA REAL PORTO REAL

A tannish lancero whose dense, heavy smoke leaves profoundly almond-like impressions on the palate along with notes of oak, citrus and allspice.
U.S.: \$7.43 U.K.: N/A

90



DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

RING GAUGE: 40 LENGTH: 6"
FILLER: DOM. REP.
BINDER: DOM. REP.
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

AVO XO PRELUDIO

This tan panetela burns and draws perfectly. The initial notes of citrus zest are complemented by an almond nuttiness and touches of leather, though the finish is slightly metallic.
U.S.: \$10.20 U.K.: N/A

89



CUBA

RING GAUGE: 38 LENGTH: 6"
FILLER: CUBA
BINDER: CUBA
WRAPPER: CUBA
BOX DATE: APRIL 2012

COHIBA CORONA ESPECIAL

There's an enticingly rich color to the wrapper of this thin, pigtailed cigar. Initial nuttiness is balanced by floral elements and a touch of coffee bean.
U.S.: N/A U.K.: £22.40

89

**U.S.A.**

RING GAUGE: 38 LENGTH: 7 1/2"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: NICARAGUA

DON PEPIN GARCIA ORIGINAL LANCERO

Earthy and coffee-like in character, this dark, thin, lancero takes on heavy black pepper notes before a long, charcoal finish.

U.S.: \$9.00 U.K.: N/A

89**NICARAGUA**

RING GAUGE: 38 LENGTH: 7 1/2"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

**L'ATELIER SELECTION SPÉCIALE
LAT 38 SPECIAL**

A near-black lancero topped with a pigtail, three-seam cap and packed with tobacco. Its dense chewy smoke is sweet and earthy with a mesquite and brown sugar quality and a mineral finish.

U.S.: \$9.75 U.K.: N/A

89**HONDURAS**

RING GAUGE: 40 LENGTH: 7 1/2"
FILLER: COSTA RICA, NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: NICARAGUA

GRAN HABANO COROJO NO. 5 LANCERO

The lush draw of this dark, oily lancero delivers a thick, meaty smoke laden with touches of fruit, nuts and leather, but the finish becomes earthy and muddled.

U.S.: \$6.40 U.K.: N/A

88**DOMINICAN REPUBLIC**

RING GAUGE: 38 LENGTH: 7"
FILLER: DOM. REP., NICARAGUA
BINDER: ECUADOR
WRAPPER: BRAZIL

LA PALINA CLASSIC LANCERO

A cedary-tasting lancero with bursts of citrus throughout. Underlying notes of earth and leather lead to a dry finish.

U.S.: \$6.50 U.K.: N/A

88**CUBA**

RING GAUGE: 38 LENGTH: 6"
FILLER: CUBA
BINDER: CUBA
WRAPPER: CUBA
BOX DATE: SEPTEMBER 2014

MONTECRISTO ESPECIAL NO. 2

A pigtailed panatela that starts off intensely floral and perfumey before taking on a more sugary, gingerbread quality.

U.S.: N/A U.K.: £15.80

88**DOMINICAN REPUBLIC**

RING GAUGE: 40 LENGTH: 6 7/8"
FILLER: NICARAGUA, DOM. REP.
BINDER: DOM. REP.
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

LA AURORA 107 LANCERO

This pigtailed lancero is crafted with a round head and dark wrapper. It shows a combination of earth and pickled ginger as well as a citrus finish that turns very acidic.

U.S.: \$7.40 U.K.: N/A

86**NICARAGUA**

RING GAUGE: 38 LENGTH: 7"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: NICARAGUA

CAIN F LANCERO

Salty and earthy with a charred wood finish, this lancero is quite strong and full bodied. Touches of rawhide come through before the charcoal finish.

U.S.: \$6.80 U.K.: N/A

85**DOMINICAN REPUBLIC**

RING GAUGE: 40 LENGTH: 7 1/2"
FILLER: DOM. REP., NICARAGUA
BINDER: DOM. REP.
WRAPPER: HONDURAS

KRISTOFF CRIOLLO LANCERO

Full of soft spots, this panatela offers some leather and raw earthy notes, but the draw is inconsistent and the finish is vegetal.

U.S.: \$8.00 U.K.: N/A

83

robustos

Ever since Cuba's Regional Edition program began in 2005, different countries around the world have featured customized, unique Cuban cigars created especially for their respective regions. The program was designed to promote individual global markets and to bring more awareness to Cuba's smaller cigar brands. The most dynamic cigar of this category was the La Gloria Cubana Revolution, scoring 92 points. It's part of the Regional Edition program and was made exclusively for the Asia Pacific region. Although the cigar is marketed mostly throughout Asia, there is a strong secondary market for regionals, and they're often resold in other countries.



CUBA
RING GAUGE: 55 LENGTH: 5 1/8"
FILLER: CUBA
BINDER: CUBA
WRAPPER: CUBA
BOX DATE: NOVEMBER 2015

LA GLORIA CUBANA REVOLUTION

EXCLUSIVO ASIA PACÍFICO

The woody, nutty character of this fat robusto becomes more intense, leaving impressions of light chocolate and oak before a sweet, honeyed almond finish.

U.S.: N/A HONG KONG: HK\$308.00

92



DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
RING GAUGE: 48 LENGTH: 5"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: NICARAGUA

DAVIDOFF NICARAGUA BOX PRESSED ROBUSTO

A box-pressed robusto with a dark, oily wrapper. Its lush draw delivers big notes of pepper and hickory wood with touches of raisins on the finish. A bold smoke.

U.S.: \$14.50 U.K.: N/A

90



U.S.A.
RING GAUGE: 50 LENGTH: 5 1/4"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: ECUADOR
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

LA PALINA FAMILY SERIES MIAMI BABE

Initial wheaty, bready notes become bright with vanilla bean, honey and cinnamon. Notes of orange peel are prominent on the finish. A tasty and attractive cigar with a pristine wrapper.

U.S.: \$16.50 U.K.: N/A

90



HONDURAS
RING GAUGE: 50 LENGTH: 5"
FILLER: DOM. REP., HONDURAS, NICARAGUA
BINDER: HONDURAS
WRAPPER: HONDURAS

MACANUDO INSPIRADO ORANGE ROBUSTO

Rolled with a reddish, Colorado wrapper, this robusto has an easy draw and even burn. Rich notes of caramel and maple segue into pleasant charriness on the finish.

U.S.: \$6.19 U.K.: N/A

90



NICARAGUA
RING GAUGE: 48 LENGTH: 4 3/4"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: HONDURAS
WRAPPER: MEXICO

NORTEÑO CORONA EXTRA

Dark and flatly pressed, this robusto delivers a chewy smoke, dense with earth and black pepper but balanced by sweetness with hints of fruit and toffee.

U.S.: \$10.00 U.K.: N/A

90



DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
RING GAUGE: 50 LENGTH: 5"
FILLER: DOM. REP.
BINDER: DOM. REP.
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

AVO CLASSIC ROBUSTO

Some minor veins protrude from the wrapper of this otherwise attractive robusto, which has a slightly airy draw. It's sweet and woody with hints of cherry and sweet vermouth before an herbal finish.

U.S.: \$9.20 U.K.: N/A

89

Every legend has a beginning.



Dreamstate

Sage Advice

Strange Passage



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CUBA

RING GAUGE: 48 LENGTH: 5"
FILLER: CUBA
BINDER: CUBA
WRAPPER: CUBA
BOX DATE: NOVEMBER 2011

H. UPMANN CONNOISSEUR NO. 1

Overwhelming floral notes dissipate for a cedary, nutty smoke redolent of almonds. The finish is woody and dry.

U.S.: N/A U.K.: £16.57

89



NICARAGUA

RING GAUGE: 50 LENGTH: 5"
FILLER: COSTA RICA, NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

NAT SHERMAN PANAMERICANA EPICURE

This reddish-brown robusto is gleaming with oils. Its initially firm draw opens up to show a meaty, earthy smoke with hints of coffee bean and a tangy finish.

U.S.: \$10.50 U.K.: N/A

89



NICARAGUA

RING GAUGE: 52 LENGTH: 4 1/2"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: NICARAGUA

REGIUS EXCLUSIVO U.S.A. CLARO ESPECIAL ROBUSTO

A pigtailed robusto with a blistery burn, this cigar starts herbal and woody but develops an earthy quality with a raw cocoa finish.

U.S.: \$8.95 U.K.: N/A

89



NICARAGUA

RING GAUGE: 48 LENGTH: 4 1/2"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

LAST CALL BY A.J. FERNANDEZ GENIALES

There's a lush draw to this tiny robusto with an uncut foot. Earth notes lead into bolder impressions of wood and toffee before a strong citrus finish.

U.S.: \$5.00 U.K.: N/A

88



HONDURAS

RING GAUGE: 50 LENGTH: 5"
FILLER: DOM. REP.
BINDER: MEXICO
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

ROOM101 THE BIG PAYBACK CONNECTICUT CHAVALA

The charred woody notes and grassiness of this robusto precede a cocoa powder finish. Its draw and burn are even throughout.

U.S.: \$5.90 U.K.: N/A

88



DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

RING GAUGE: 52 LENGTH: 5"
FILLER: DOM. REP.
BINDER: DOM. REP.
WRAPPER: DOM. REP.

FLORES Y RODRIGUEZ HABANO SELECCIÓN MÁGICOS

Pecan and ground coffee notes stand out prominently before hints of leather and minerals. The cigar draws well but burns unevenly and leaves a charry aftertaste.

U.S.: \$4.95 U.K.: N/A

87



HONDURAS

RING GAUGE: 54 LENGTH: 5"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: HONDURAS

PADILLA CRIOLLO '98 ROBUSTO

A floral, botanical robusto, which offers notes of juniper, anis and vanilla bean as well a touch of ginger and an herbal finish.

U.S.: \$6.00 U.K.: N/A

87



NICARAGUA

RING GAUGE: 46 LENGTH: 4 7/8"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: NICARAGUA

PADRÓN DELICIAS

Rumpled and box pressed with a wrinkled cap. Herbal notes become tangy and woody with bread notes and baking spices, but the finish is sharp and the draw is airy.

U.S.: \$5.50 U.K.: N/A

87

Cigars are listed first by country and then by score. Please refer to the main tasting pages for notes and prices.

CIGAR AFICIONADO'S 100-POINT SCALE

Classic
95–100

Outstanding
90–94

Very good to excellent
80–89

Average to good commercial quality
70–79

Don't waste your money
60–69

Not available
n/a

Note: all prices are manufacturers' suggested retail, before taxes.

CUBA

- 94 Romeo y Julieta Belicoso
- 93 Partagás Serie E No. 2
- 92 La Gloria Cubana Revolution Exclusivo Asia Pacífico
- 91 Hoyo de Monterrey Le Hoyo de San Juan (Tubo)
- 91 Montecristo Open Regata
- 90 Cohiba Pirámides Extra
- 90 Partagás Salomon
- 90 Ramon Allones Gigantes
- 89 Cohiba Corona Especial
- 89 H. Upmann Connoisseur No. 1
- 89 Punch Double Corona
- 88 H. Upmann Magnum 46
- 88 Montecristo Especial No. 2

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

- 92 Ashton Heritage Puro Sol Churchill
- 92 Fuente Fuente OpusX Double Corona
- 91 E.P. Carrillo Selección Oscuro Especial No. 6
- 91 Romeo y Julieta 1875 Deluxe No. 1
- 90 Aging Room Bin No. 1 D Major
- 90 Davidoff Nicaragua Box Pressed Robusto
- 90 La Flor Dominicana Cameroon Cabinet Lancero
- 90 Romeo y Julieta Reserva Real Porto Real
- 89 Ashton Virgin Sun Grown Spellbound
- 89 Avo Classic Robusto
- 89 Avo XO Preludio
- 89 H. Upmann Vintage Cameroon Churchill
- 88 Diamond Crown Torpedo No. 8
- 88 La Flor Dominicana Ligero Oscuro Natural Cabinet Torpedito
- 88 La Palina Classic Lancero
- 88 Montecristo Grupo de Maestros Private Batch II Toro
- 88 Partagas 1845 Extra Fuerte Double Corona
- 88 VegaFina Churchill
- 87 Arturo Fuente Double Chateau Fuente
- 87 Davidoff Colorado Claro Double "R"
- 87 Davidoff Millennium Blend Series Piramides
- 87 Diamond Crown Maximus Double Corona No. 1
- 87 Flores y Rodriguez Habano Selección Mágicos
- 87 Fonseca Cubano Limitado Toro
- 87 Macanudo Maduro Prince Philip
- 87 Por Larrañaga Gran Corona
- 87 Ramon Allones Heritage Series 652
- 86 Cusano Dominican Connecticut Churchill
- 86 La Aurora 107 Lancero
- 85 Nat Sherman Sterling Churchill
- 83 Kristoff Criollo Lancero

HONDURAS

- 91 Hammer + Sickie Hermitage No. 1 Toro
- 91 The Edge Lite Double Corona
- 90 Macanudo Inspirado Orange Robusto
- 90 Punch Grand Cru Diademas
- 89 Alec Bradley Mundial No. 8
- 89 Heritage By Dunhill Churchill
- 89 Hoyo Toro
- 88 Camacho Ecuador Churchill
- 88 Gran Habano Corojo No. 5 Lancero
- 88 Room101 The Big Payback Connecticut Chavala
- 87 Aladino Churchill
- 87 Padilla Criollo '98 Robusto
- 84 Rocky Patel Vintage 1992 Churchill

NICARAGUA

- 92 Daniel Marshall Red Label Torpedo Box-Aged 1 Year
- 92 My Father No. 2 Belicoso
- 91 Illusione hl
- 91 Liga Privada Único Serie Feral Flying Pig
- 91 Padrón 1964 Anniversary Series "A"
- 90 Luchador Loco Perfecto
- 90 Murcielago Nocturne
- 90 Norteño Corona Extra
- 90 Oliva Serie O Churchill
- 90 Tatujaje Avion 13
- 90 Villiger Colorado Churchill
- 89 Alec Bradley American Classic Blend Churchill
- 89 Espada by Montecristo Guard
- 89 L'Atelier Selection Spéciale LAT 38 Special
- 89 Nat Sherman Panamericana Epicure
- 89 Regius Exclusivo U.S.A. Claro Especial Robusto
- 88 Last Call by A.J. Fernandez Geniales
- 87 La Aroma de Cuba Double Corona
- 87 Padrón Delicias
- 85 Cain F Lancero
- 82 Joya de Nicaragua Antaño Dark Corojo Poderoso

U.S.A.

- 90 La Palina Family Series Miami Babe
- 89 Casa Fernandez Miami Toro
- 89 Don Pepin Garcia Original Lancero

connoisseur's corner

This collection of aged cigars covers all types of vintages and dimensions. The smokes range from 11 years old all the way to a cigar that's been around for more than five decades; from the ultra-slim Punch Panetelas Grandes (all of 33 ring gauge) to the pleasantly plump Tatuaje RC233—55 ring gauge at its fattest point, with curves like a pinup model. Our highest score, a near-perfect 99 points, went to one of our household favorites, a Hoyo de Monterrey Double Corona from Cuba rolled more than 20 years ago. This stately double corona is smoking beautifully, and the flavor suggests that it can rest for many more years before beginning to decline. Close behind, at 97 points, was the dainty and older Davidoff No. 2, a reminder of when that brand was rolled in Cuba.



HOYO DE MONTERREY DOUBLE CORONA (1995)

A gorgeous cigar that looks like a slab of dark chocolate, made from one of Cuba's better vintages. The draw is nearly perfect. The cigar yields drier notes to start—slate, minerals and earth—and the leathery core grows more prominent as the cigar turns to ash, with a sweet note of peanuts and French roast coffee. Marvelous, with plenty of structure left for years to come. —*David Savona*

99



DAVIDOFF NO. 2 (1990)

A good-looking cigar with a medium-brown wrapper and a pigtail cap. Despite the firm draw, it is full of pleasant flavors, with a creamy profile and a sweet spiciness that smacks of cinnamon. A long, pleasant finish. —*Marvin R. Shanken*

97



COHIBA SIGLO IV (1994)

This well-aged, midsize Cohiba has a gorgeous exterior and a perfect draw after 22 years in the humidor. The flavor is austere to start, and after some time it gets sweet and woody, with a faint hint of peppercorn. The smoke takes on a rich, long chocolate finish near the end, a delightful reward. —*David Savona*

95



PUNCH PANETELAS GRANDES (CIRCA 1950s)

Plucked from a traditional dress-box of 25, this skinny smoke is subtly box pressed with a slightly rounded head and a reddish wrapper. It has a smooth draw and is rather mild, with a bit of a peppery character along with some pleasant touches of nutmeg. —*Marvin R. Shanken*

95



ROMEO Y JULIETA EXHIBICIÓN NO. 4 CABINET SELECCIÓN (1994)

Decades hibernating in a 50-count cabinet have rounded out the character of this robusto, which is soft, but ample. There are still some visible oils to the otherwise medium-claro wrapper. The cigar finesses the palate with a smoke that's floral, nutty and sweet before it peaks with a big graham-cracker note that seems to come out of nowhere and lingers for the duration of the cigar. —*Gregory Mottola*

94



TATUAJE RC233 (2005)

This immaculate diadema is dressed in a stunning, golden-brown wrapper dotted with oils. It has the faint aroma of fresh-baked cookies and a refined leather note. Spiced cappuccino comes in, and almonds and citrus peel combine at the midpoint to create a creamsicle effect. Eleven years has tempered this once-intense cigar, but it's still complex, full bodied and burns dead even. —*Andrew Nagy*

93

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STYLE



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Walking RED

**Cigar lover Michael Cudlitz
battles for survival in style each week
in the hit AMC series “The Walking Dead”**

When we last saw Abraham Ford, the zombie-hunting, red-haired tough guy from the hit series “The Walking Dead,” he and his companions were kneeling in the dark, surrounded by a score of bad guys and staring down a particularly nasty adversary, armed with a baseball bat wrapped in barbed wire. That bat was then swung with bad intent, raining a (presumably) fatal series of mighty blows upon someone’s unlucky head, the victim’s identity a mystery. Viewers were left with a cliffhanger—who lived? Who died?

Michael Cudlitz, the actor who plays Ford, walks into a Palm steakhouse in midtown New York looking very much alive. He’s wearing dark brown biker boots, jeans and an untucked blue shirt. Six-foot-two without the boots, Cudlitz has a powerful build and a bushy mustache the size and shape of a horseshoe, his signature look for portraying the toughest character on one of television’s most popular shows, watched by 17 million people on Sunday nights. “The Walking Dead” returns in October for its seventh season. So—is his character still alive?

Cudlitz takes a sip of his drink, a Bulleit Rye Old Fashioned, and orders a strip steak medium rare. He’s not spilling any secrets, but all signs point to his character’s survival. First, he still has the mustache, plus the orange-hued mane (he’s actually a blond who dyes his hair to portray Ford). To top it all off, Cudlitz has been filming in Atlanta, home base for “The Walking Dead.” He looks just like his alterego, without the guns, the dirt and the occasional gallon or so of fake blood, which is all part and parcel of starring in such a show.

Much like “Game of Thrones” or “The Sopranos,” main characters on “The Walking Dead” meet their doom on a regular basis. In this show the dead walk the earth, society has collapsed and those still alive face danger each and every day. And while there are zombies everywhere, the graver danger often lies in encounters with other survivors, for all are battling for the dwindling slices of civilization that remain. No one is safe. “Typically the lead of a show is not wondering if he’s going to have a job next year—even though they know the show has come back already,” says Cudlitz.

Michael Cudlitz burns his way through one of his favorite cigars, an Arturo Fuente Hemingway Signature, at the Brooklyn Navy Yard in New York City.

BY DAVID SAVONA PORTRAITS BY SPENCER HEYFRON



For now he's happy to be free of the grime he has to wear on set to portray a man who is wandering a wasteland and fighting for his life. He sometimes returns to his hotel from a shoot only to find his on-set cleanup has missed a spot or two of fake blood, dirt or both. He's ruined more than his share of hotel-room towels.

His character is remarkable and memorable, a former Army sergeant who loses his wife and children in brutal fashion soon after the world falls apart. With nothing to live for, he prepares to kill himself, only to find a person in need of protection, which gives him a new mission and a renewed will to live. His military training is his edge in a world gone mad, and his character's proclivity to speak his mind with poetic profanity adds a bit of humor to a very dark show.

"He'd rather go through it than around it—and I appreciate that of him," says Cudlitz, a 51-year-old who speaks in a softer voice than the bombastic, zombie-killing character he portrays on the small screen. "I think we all wish we were like that. He's the guy who says what we're all thinking. He's so indirect in his directness. The guy can answer most of the questions he's asked with 'yes' or 'no,' and he chooses this 15-minute route to get there. He's probably the least poetic poet on television. People have called him the poet laureate of the apocalypse." An example of the word of Abraham: "There is a vast ocean of shit that you people don't know shit about."

Born and raised in Flushing, Queens, Cudlitz moved when he was five to Lakewood, New Jersey. He always yearned to act. "I've wanted to be an actor as long as I remember wanting to be anything," he says. As a kid he would act out the commercials on TV, singing the jingles. "My folks say that I always wanted to do it. I was always performing."

He enrolled in the California Institute of Arts in Los Angeles but had a plan if acting didn't pan out. "I was going to school for engineering as my backup," he says. His father encouraged him to follow his dream. "The next day," he says, "I quit school."

His first break was getting a part in *A River Runs Through It*, the 1992 Robert Redford film. Later, while he was working as the construction coordinator on "Beverly Hills 90210," to pay his way through acting school using his hands, the producers saw his work on the big screen and gave him a role in the television show.

But his breakout role was portraying Staff Sergeant Denver "Bull" Randleman in HBO's critically acclaimed World War II drama "Band of Brothers," which originally aired in 2001. The miniseries, based on the book of the same name by Stephen Ambrose, centers on the members of Easy Company, who fought their way across Europe in such landmark conflicts as the D-Day invasion of Normandy and the Battle of the Bulge. The Steven Spielberg/Tom Hanks production stressed realism, and for the actors portraying U.S. soldiers fighting in the Second World War that meant going through boot camp. For Cudlitz, it also meant serious research on the man he was portraying. Everyone who knew Randleman mentioned one particular trait.

"He always had a cigar stub hanging from his mouth. Everyone described him that way," says Cudlitz, happily putting fire to the foot of a Bolivar Corona Gigante, a Cuban Churchill with a wrapper the color of a chocolate bar. "I spoke to his wife, I spoke to his friends. We all think we know who we are. If I really want to know who you are, let me go ask your wife. Let me ask your buddy from high school."

"He's the guy who says what we're all thinking. He's so indirect in his directness. People have called him the poet laureate of the apocalypse."



The role that made Cudlitz famous, Denver "Bull" Randleman in the acclaimed HBO miniseries "Band of Brothers" (left), also sparked his love of cigars. Today Cudlitz portrays Abraham Ford in AMC's hit "The Walking Dead," a post-apocalyptic show (right) that provides its characters few cigar breaks.

LEFT: DAVID JAMES/HBO



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Cudlitz, puffing away alone by the pier, prefers to smoke his cigars with others. "For me, it's a very social thing," he says. "It's carving out time. It's a commitment."



HBO originally gave Cudlitz cigars for the show, but they were horrible. "They were basically like cigarettes," he says. "I went to a cigar place in Knightsbridge, in London. It was a club. It had a little cigar shop on the street with a really nice humidor. I got to speaking with the guy who ran the place, his name was David Fetzer. He gave me a history of cigars, and he was very, very knowledgeable. I settled on what we were going to smoke. It was a very long Churchill, which I would cut into three pieces."

In the thick of a war, Randleman wouldn't have smoked cigars like an aficionado in a cigar bar, leisurely puffing away on a double corona without a care in the world, and replacing it with another. He puffed when he could, kept a half-smoked cigar in his mouth and his pocket, never knowing when he would find another. Cudlitz did the same. "I found the perfect size that would work for what I was doing," he says. Every two weeks or so, he would return to the cigar shop to buy another Churchill to make his three-stub prop.

He kept the cigar stubs in the jacket pocket and instructed the staff to never clean the outer jacket. The aroma would help him take on the character of Bull. "When I would get to work I would bury my face in the jacket. I wanted the cigar smell, the sweat—for me that was Bull. I would throw the jacket on, put a cigar in my mouth. That pulled everything together."

Bringing Randleman to life led Cudlitz to his a-ha cigar moment. His wife had travelled to England and visited the same cigar shop where Cudlitz bought his prop smokes in search of a 10th anniversary present. She splurged, buying an "A" sized vintage Cuban that had a price tag of £70, worth about \$140 at the time. He was horrified. "A \$140 cigar—are you out of your mind?" He brought it home and kept it in a bag. A few months later, he brought it to a dinner with some of his friends from the show.

"We sat on an outdoor patio. After dinner I lit the cigar. I remember thinking after the first two puffs—wait a minute. It was amazing. Indescribably amazing. The taste, the smoothness of it, the complexity." He was blown away by the huge cigar, which was still going strong by the time dinner broke up. "I get in my truck, I'm still smoking the cigar. I get home, there's still five inches of the cigar left. So I sit in front of the house just smoking the cigar. I'm not ready to be finished with this experience, and it was still changing. That was my definitive cigar. That was the moment where I said 'I get it.' I beyond get it."

Cigars have found him in his zombie gig. In Season 6 of "The Walking Dead," Cudlitz's Abraham makes a precious find, stumbling across a box containing a few cigars while out on a supply run. He stops, sits on the back of an army truck, puts his assault rifle aside and lights up, momentarily forgetting the problems of the hell in which he lives, enjoying a little bit of civilization for a change.

Cudlitz was originally against the idea.

"It was a little too close to Bull and a little too close to me. I didn't necessarily agree with that. I want the characters to live on their own," he explains. "But I justified it—had he come across cigars, he would have smoked it. And I was kind of having fun with the audience—it was an homage to Bull."

Cudlitz has found a niche playing a guy who knows how to handle trouble. That includes his portrayal of police officer John Cooper on the acclaimed 2009–2013 TV series "Southland," (written by "Ray Donovan" creator Ann Biderman). Cudlitz won a Critics Choice Award for Best Supporting Actor for his work in the final season of the show.

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FEATURED CIGAR

HENRY CLAY TATTOO TORO
DOM. REP. • PRICE: \$9.50 • BODY: MED. TO FULL
For a full tasting, see page two.

92 POINTS

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A SEASON OF FESTIVALS
CIGAR FESTIVALS ABOUND IN WINTER
and span Nicaragua, Cuba and the Dominican Republic. All are cultural excursions into the world of premium cigars, where manufacturers open their fields and factories to enthusiasts from around the world. See this issue for details on all three events.



CIGAR AFICIONADO'S BIG SMOKE NEW YORK CITY

BIG SMOKE IN THE BIG APPLE
IF BIG SMOKE VEGAS WAS TOO FAR AWAY, THERE'S STILL NEW YORK.
This Thursday, Pier 92—an events space on the west side of Manhattan—will welcome cigar smokers from New York City and the metropolitan area to light up en masse for the city's largest smoking party of the year. For one night, cigar lovers will be able to partake in the gentlemanly pastime of premium smoking while interacting with some of the biggest cigar manufacturers in the business. The festivities begin at 6 p.m., and by the time they end at 9:30 p.m., each attendee will walk out with more than 30 premium cigars. For more details on this week's Big Smoke New York, see cigaraficionado.com.

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CIGAR WATCH

FROM THE EDITORS OF CIGAR AFICIONADO
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EXPERIENCE THE WORLD THROUGH THE EYES OF AN ICON



FEATURED CIGAR
Padilla La Pilar Robusto (91 Points)
Padilla creator Ernesto Padilla wanted to create a portfolio of cigars that retails for less than \$8 without compromising on blend quality or construction. He did just that with La Pilar, choosing a high-priming Ecuadorian wrapper, two binders from Nicaragua, and fillers consisting of Nicaraguan Corojo and Cuban-seed Criollo from the Dominican Republic. In April's Cigar Aficionado, the Robusto (5 inches by 54 ring gauge, \$5.50) impressed our panel with notes of cedar and cocoa.

[Padilla Cigars Ratings](#) [Peruse Our Tasting Database](#)

FDA Ruling Threatens Cigar Industry
The Food and Drug Administration has announced tough new regulations on the entire U.S. tobacco industry, including the segment that makes and markets premium, handmade cigars. Despite previous hopes, the premium cigar industry did not get the exemption it and thousands of cigar lovers across the United States had lobbied for. The FDA chose Option One, the toughest of the two routes, casting aside any exemption for premium cigars.

[Full Story](#) [Timeline: FDA & Cigar Regulation](#)



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Where To Smoke: Lighting Up In London
It is sometimes wonderful when things don't go as planned. That's been the case in London, where faceless legislators imposed a nationwide smoking ban in public places in 2008. The new law had an overnight impact on public smoking in general, but eight years hence the thriving tradition of cigar smoking in clubs, hotels, cigar shops and even fine restaurants has resurfaced through the ingenuity of a coterie of clever purveyors bent on keeping the custom alive. Our guide to smoke-friendly havens reveals Europe's cigar capital has found a way to thrive in the face of tough smoking bans.

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Montecristo Ships Limited Private Batch II
Altadis U.S.A.'s elite group of cigarmakers and blenders, the Grupo de Maestros, has again made one of their private blends public, but it won't be around for long. The Montecristo Grupo de Maestros Private Batch II is the second installment in the limited-edition series, which pays homage to the group's 250 years of combined experience in the cigar business. The cigars are on their way to retailers now, but only 250 boxes of 100 cigars each will be released.

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“The same way you don’t walk away from the bar with whiskey in your glass—you don’t want to put four or five inches of cigar down and walk away from it.”



Cudlitz, who has a bit of an irreverent streak, always wanted to perform. “I’ve wanted to be an actor as long as I remember wanting to be anything.”

He also crossed one big item off his bucket list, when he traveled to Cuba with former schoolmate Don Cheadle to film a few episodes of the Showtime series “House of Lies.”

“Mike’s a big cigar dude, I think he was in hog heaven,” says Cheadle, who has known Cudlitz for more than 30 years. “He’s a very loyal guy—a lot more sensitive than the characters he plays. I think he has a gooey center under that tough façade.”

Cudlitz admits to enjoying his time in Havana. “I found the people to be amazing. It was a very positive energy,” he says. And he enjoyed the cigars. “I smoked many Cuban cigars in Cuba,” he says. He was happy he could bring some back, but was disappointed about the \$100 limit.

Some of those cigars might end up in a very special humidor. Cudlitz is a woodworker of considerable talent: he built his own house in California as well as much of its furniture. “There’s a floor in my house that is made from a 125-foot pecan tree that used to be in my backyard. I had it all slabbed on site.” Woodworking is quiet time for Cudlitz. “It’s just you and the piece that you’re making. If you’re doing stuff for yourself, there’s not a timeline. It’s just time that you spend with yourself. I don’t think any of us do that enough—something you just love to do, no time limit, no time constraints—projects you get back to over time.”

He learned how to work wood from his father, a cabinetmaker, and when Cudlitz told his dad he was having trouble finding the right sized humidor, his father started making him a custom model himself.

The cigars that go inside will be smoked among friends. “For me, it’s a very social thing,” he says. “It’s carving out time. It’s a commitment.”

He likes an espresso with his cigars, or a whiskey. “I’m learning more and more about whiskey, strangely enough from my wife,” he says. “Most people don’t expect women to be whiskey drinkers. I find that odd. Some of the most awesome women I know drink whiskey and tequila, drink it neat. Whiskey for me is very similar in taste and experience as cigars.”

In his downtime he’s likely to be found with a cigar, particularly Fuente Hemingways. He tends to share his smoking (and whiskey drinking) sojourns on social media, where he has an ardent following. He chooses what he’s going to smoke based on time. “The same way you don’t walk away from the bar with whiskey in your glass—you don’t want to put four or five inches of cigar down and walk away from it. You’re being rude to yourself. It’s delicious, and you’re leaving at the best part.” ♦

To watch Michael Cudlitz on video, talking about his love of cigars, visit cigaraficionado.com





One of many tobacco fields
in Estelí owned and farmed
by A.J. Fernandez.

Moving

A.J. Fernandez has quickly built one of
Nicaragua's biggest premium cigar operations

Mountains

BY GREGORY MOTTOLA | PHOTOGRAPHS BY RICHARD LEONARDI



Workers tend the fields of a Fernandez farm in Estelí, Nicaragua. The Criollo '98 tobacco in the ground is still young, but quickly grows to full maturity.

Most people avoid driving the Pan-American Highway at night, especially in the mountainous region of northern Nicaragua where the Estelí valley becomes mired by a very particular kind of darkness, dense and disorienting. The road here is unreasonably narrow and guardrails are nonexistent. Street lights are scarce and so is electricity for that matter. One wrong turn, one moment of distraction could mean a tumble down a steep cliff into the valley floor far below.

But here we are, and what was originally supposed to be a trip to the A.J. Fernandez cigar factory in a busy, well-lit town has been rerouted. Our SUV is now headed on this winding and unpredictable highway to the tobacco fields in the dark of night.

Our halogens can only do so much, throwing what amounts to a piddling excuse for illumination. Even our high-beams are swallowed up by the mountain darkness. From out of the gloom a roaring semi rounds a curve without warning and comes straight at us at meteoric speed, its lamps a pair of twin comets leaving everyone in our vehicle temporarily blind, including the driver. After the bright lights pass, no one can see anything for a moment and the driver has to guess at the next narrow curve until his vision returns. Or crash into the side of the mountain, which seems far more likely.

Prayers are somehow answered and the driver finally turns off the highway to a rickety metal gate near the edge of the road just before another tractor trailer blasts by behind us. Two guards armed with shotguns open the gate and the SUV begins to tread a steep and rocky path.

On top of the hill is an idling tractor, and on top of the tractor is Abdel Josef Fernandez. Most know him as “A.J.,” the guy with the big factory; the guy who went from nothing to cigar stardom in a short 10 years; and the guy who kicks around on his farms even after dark. Long after the field workers have gone home, he stays and ruminates. Is he night farming?

“My friend!” he shouts in a thick Cuban accent. Even in the dark, he’s excited to have a visitor. Surrounding us, we later find out, are fields and fields of Criollo '98 tobacco that nobody but Fernandez with his owl-like night vision can see. In the light of the machinery, one can pick up an odd detail—Fernandez has grayed prematurely. A young man still in his thirties, his hair is already the color of smoked pewter, though he still has the face and enthusiasm of a young man. He’s always smiling and is quick to classify new acquaintances as friends.

“I am a *guajiro*,” he says as he hops off the tractor. “A country boy,” and then starts to laugh. Not the laugh of a lunatic, nor quite the laugh of someone who’s been out in the sun too long. Just the good-natured laugh of someone who loves being around tobacco. Night farming indeed.

Fernandez gets into a pickup truck and drives back down the bumpy hill towards his house, which is up the highway right next to his factory. He’s off to catch the rest of “Monday Night Football.” That’s American football, not soccer, and it’s one of the few things that can get him away from his tobacco. Fernandez might be Nicaragua’s most ardent American football fan.

Why should anyone care about a guy who loiters in his own tobacco farm in the middle of the night? For starters, he is the owner and operator

of a cigar factory that churns out 14 million hand-rolled premium cigars per year, larger production than many well-known boutique brands and big enough to put him within spitting distance of large cigarmaker status.

If that weren't enough, he's also becoming one of the most prolific farmers in Nicaragua. Right now, Fernandez cultivates more than 600 acres of tobacco farms across Nicaragua. That includes 360 acres in Estelí alone, and he continues to buy land to grow more tobacco, even if he has to move a mountain to do it.

Not a proverbial mountain, but a literal one. Fernandez has orchestrated a massive excavation project that's literally carving land out of a mountain-side, leveling the earth, stone by stone, because he loves the soil.

"I prefer mountainside land," says Fernandez. "The nutrients flow downhill." Born in Cuba, his English is limited, but best when talking about tobacco and cigars.

Fernandez owns most of the land on which he grows and leases a bit of acreage from a few growers who produce exceptional tobaccos. In addition to Estelí, his tobacco farms across Nicaragua include plots in Condega, Jalapa, Pueblo Nuevo, Quilalí and on the island of Ometepe.

"In my opinion, the climate in Ometepe is most like Cuba," offers Fernandez. "It's the humidity that comes from being next to the lake."

"My opinion," he says again.

Many of his statements on tobacco are often bookended with the words "my opinion." It's evident that he's confident in his beliefs, but it's also clear that Fernandez doesn't want to come off as arrogant. In an industry full of hubris, absolutes and obstinately strong opinions, Fernandez is mindful of his tone.

At sunrise the next day, Fernandez heads back to the farm to show a visitor how it appears in the sunlight. Plots of land at the foot of the mountain are broken up and overturned from a deep and recent plowing. Because the soil in the Estelí area of Nicaragua is so black, the chunks of plowed dirt look like pieces of demolished asphalt from a distance. Further up the hill, the landscape opens up to terraced fields that are gleaming with Criollo '98 tobacco. This is the San Lotano farm, and the leaves of tobacco here seem to grow thicker than usual and are exceptionally glossy.

San Lotano is one of many farms that Fernandez owns, however it's one of his favorites and the one he spends the most time on whether it be for actual cultivation, or simply a quiet place to clear his mind and watch tobacco flutter in the mountain breeze. His namesake series of cigars—San Lotano, San Lotano Oval, San Lotano The Bull—all contain tobacco from this particular plot. Many have scored in the 90s in CIGAR AFICIONADO and CIGAR INSIDER blind reviews.

Fernandez grows a mix of tobacco styles on his farms, concentrating most heavily on the

"In my opinion, the climate in Ometepe is most like Cuba. It's the humidity that comes from being next to the lake."

Cuban varieties Criollo '98 and Corojo '99. He experiments some as well, trying a broadleaf hybrid he calls 020379. If a client is sincerely interested, he'll make a small run of cigars using a bit of Pelo d'Oro, a finicky, old Cuban seed type that few growers like to plant on account of its susceptibility to disease. One client for this leaf is a German manufacturer of high-end luxury luggage who wanted a cigar to sell alongside his \$30,000 bags and suitcases. Fernandez says this purveyor of luggage intends on selling the Pelo d'Oro cigars at \$500 each. He chuckles at the

idea of someone selling his cigars at such a price, but reserves judgment.

"He can sell his cigar for as much as he wants. It doesn't bother me."

On a normal day, Fernandez wakes up before dawn, gets into his pickup truck and heads to one of his farms. By midmorning, he's walking through the front door of his factory, Tabacalera A.J. Fernandez Cigars de Nicaragua, located on the outskirts of downtown Estelí, a short drive from his farm.

For most of the day, the factory is awash in sunlight. High ceilings and skylights give the entire factory floor an airy feel and natural light. Built in 2013, it only took a few years before the factory was running at maximum capacity and every rolling table was occupied. While Fernandez has his own brands, like the vaunted San Lotano, 60 percent of the cigars made at this factory go to Cigars International, a giant catalog company owned by Scandinavian Tobacco Group. About 10 percent of his production is dedicated to private-label brands and the rest of the workforce produces Fernandez's own brands. If Cigar International's catalog customers don't know A.J.'s name, they know his cigars, most notably Man O' War and Diesel—two brands that have become immensely popular with budget

conscious fans of full-bodied cigars.

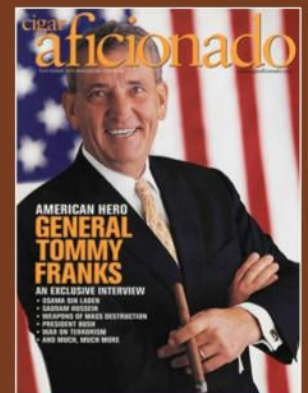
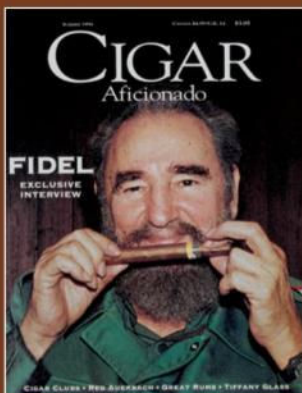
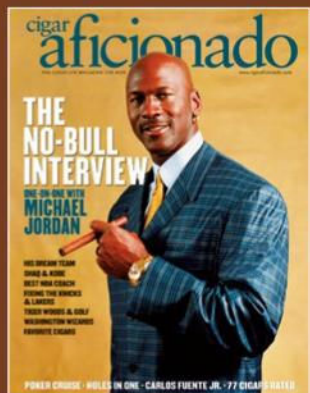
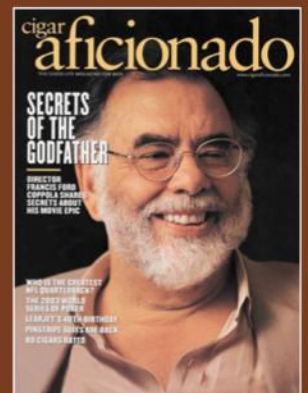
Cigars International keeps the factory in business, but the catalog company has no direct financial stake in the operation (despite industry whispers that they've bankrolled the factory). Tabacalera A.J. Fernandez belongs to Fernandez alone. The steady flow of massive business from Cigars International allows Fernandez the leeway to be creative with his own brands. Lines like San Lotano (Top 25 cigars of 2012, 91 points), New World and Enclave, which scored 92 points in CIGAR AFICIONADO for its Churchill size, are emblematic of Fernandez's acumen as a cigar maker. And while his large operation requires him to buy a lot of third-party leaf in bulk, he uses mostly tobacco that he's grown himself for his own brands.

As with most factory owners, he's developed methods of fermentation and aging that he feels work best on Nicaraguan tobacco. Unlike other factory owners, Fernandez isn't particularly secretive about the way he runs things. He feels that few people would be willing to put the tobacco through so many long, protracted steps, so he's more than willing to lay out the blueprint for his process.



Fernandez unpacks aged tobacco from a bale for inspection. First, he rolls up the leaves into small rustic cigars called *fumas*. Then, he lights it up and smokes it to judge its quality.

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First, tobacco ferments in *pilónes* (Spanish for piles) for one year with the stems on. Then, the tobacco is baled for two more years, also with the stems. After two years have elapsed, the tobacco is taken out, destemmed, rotated and put through a light fermentation for three months before it spends another nine months in bales again, rounding out a full year. The rest is intuition: another year here, an extra nine months there, depending on how the tobacco behaves. Fernandez clearly obsesses about the quality of his leaf.

“Because of the way we age our tobaccos, there is no ammonia on the taste,” he explains, pointing to his tongue. “It disappears once the cigar is rolled.”

He’s right. A walk from the factory floor into his aging room of rolled cigars supports his assertion. Where there’s normally a faint—sometimes even strong—ammonia smell in many aging rooms, there isn’t any perceptible trace in his. Cigars go here the day they’re rolled in order to stabilize humidity between the different tobacco components. It’s also where the blend melds, or “marries,” and sniffing a bundle of cigars from a shelf yields only the smell of fresh, rich tobacco.

His exceptionally productive factory and growing agricultural operation didn’t start off so grand. Fernandez was born in Cuba’s countryside, in the San Luís area of Pinar del Río. His father, Ismael, and his uncle worked for the government’s agricultural department specifically for tobacco. While he learned from his father, he also learned about tobacco from someone named Riccardo Ledezma. By the age of 13, Fernandez would go straight to a tobacco farm after school called Finca La China. By his recollection, this was the farm where Ledezma grew the first test runs of Havana ’92 before the Cuban government approved it for cultivation. He was one of Fernandez’s earliest mentors and taught him about planting tobacco, harvesting tobacco by priming and hanging tobacco in the barns. After harvest seasons were over, he’d learn how to sort tobacco.

“I wasn’t interested in anything that wasn’t tobacco,” he recalls.

This was where he learned how to ferment leaves with the stems on, unpacking, destemming the tobacco and then repacking everything back into parcels for extended fermentation. Meanwhile, his grandfather had



Fernandez (top left) inspecting tobacco as part of his routine. Tabacalera A.J. Fernandez Cigars S.A. (top right) is easy to see from the road. Cigar rollers (above) make 14 million smokes a year.

a local brand called San Lutano (spelled with a U, not an O) that he sold to people in the area. A San Lutano is the name given to anyone from San Luís. Eventually, Fernandez’s father left Cuba to work for his cousin, Nestor Plasencia, one of the largest tobacco growers in Nicaragua. Eight years later in 2003, Fernandez followed his dad. He left Cuba under the pretense of a family visit and didn’t return. Not to live, anyway.

During his first year out of Cuba, Fernandez lived with his father but got a job with a grower who sold tobacco to the Plasencias. After that, he opened a most modest cigar factory—three rolling tables in his house. Out of familial obligation, Plasencia provided A.J. with tobacco to roll cigars, which Plasencia would then buy.

“On three tables, I rolled 20,000 cigars a month for Nestor,” says Fernandez. The arrangement didn’t exactly make Fernandez a wealthy man, but it did allow him to develop his rolling techniques. Eventually, he started fermenting tobacco in his own home, mostly for experimentation purposes.



A.J. Fernandez and his father, Ismael, in the aging room, where cigars rest and blended tobaccos marry right after they are rolled. Ismael helps his son with the daily operations in the factory.

His first expansion was building an overhang off the side of his house to accommodate 15 more rolling tables.

Then, A.J. got his first big client: Rocky Patel. Patel contracted A.J. to produce the Fusion line, Signature Series and his seasonal Rocky Patel Winter Collection and Summer Collection.

"I was making 20,000 to 60,000 cigars a month for Rocky," says Fernandez. "A year and a half later I opened my first real factory in 2005 called Tabacalera Fernandez." (He no longer makes cigars for Patel.)

This led to an even bigger client: Cigars International, the large company that contracted Fernandez to make a few brands. As his operation grew he took on more, most notably Diesel and Man O' War, which have since become catalog staples and can even be found in some retail shops. By 2006, Tabacalera Fernandez was making four million cigars annually, mostly with tobacco that he purchased from the Plasencias. That same year, he bought a 28-acre plot of land in Estelí that he named "San Lotano."

"It was virgin soil on a mountainside plot," Fernandez explains. "It's in a valley so it took a long time to level out the land but it came out great."

He's been buying land almost every year since, putting most of his money either back into his operation or back into the purchasing of farms. Now, between his large clients, his personal brands and his collection of farms, he's in the enviable position of being both grower and manufacturer. His portfolio is based around the four San Lotano brands but, all told, his factory produces 30 different cigar lines.

As to why his grandfather's San Lotano brand became San Lotano, Fernandez says it was a registration mistake. They screwed up the name

at the trademark office and he just decided to go with it.

"I didn't think he'd be so successful," says Nestor Andrés Plasencia, Nestor Plasencia's son and A.J.'s cousin. "A.J. opened up a factory at a time when many people were trying to open up their own factories, and failing—people with more experience than he had. Naturally I am happy that he's done so well, but I was surprised."

His next big challenge is becoming more familiar with the American market. Fernandez split with his former partner Kris Katchaturian last year, who took care of U.S. distribution. Fernandez usually toiled in Nicaragua while his ex-partner handled retailers and consumers. Now that the partnership has dissolved, Fernandez spends more time in the United States getting to know his retailers and establishing a closer relationship with consumers.

On the retail level his most popular brands are San Lotano Oval, New World and Enclave. The Oval represents what might be the industry's first ergonomic cigar—its pressed, flattened form and exceptionally rounded edges make it comfortable in the mouth. New World represents a more

modern type of cigar—box-pressed, bold and full of potent Nicaraguan tobacco. And Enclave is a more nuanced approach, which he blended with his father, Ismael, who also helps to run the factory. Enclave could be characterized as a more old-fashioned blend and an exercise in restraint.

"I think the American market changes every day," Fernandez explains. "There isn't a lot of brand loyalty. People like to smoke a variety of different cigars. Every blend in my factory is different."

Then there's A.J.'s father, Ismael. After years of learning the tobacco trade in Cuba, and then again in Ocotál, Nicaragua, with the Plasencias, he's

now joined his son and helps to run Tabacalera Fernandez. There is something almost deity-like about his presence in the factory. His hair is a slicked-back, pearlescent shade of white and he's always on hand to offer soft-spoken guidance to his son.

"We don't always agree," Fernandez says of his father. "I'll make a blend and he'll make a blend. Then, we pass it out to some people in the factory and see which one they like better."

It's far from a rivalry and Fernandez finds the dynamic entertaining and, of course, part of his learning process. This is one of the industry's unsung father-and-son teams.

Another tarry layer of night has fallen on Estelí and Fernandez exits through the front door of his factory and steps into his pickup before turning right towards the Pan-American Highway. He could be heading to his San Lotano farm one last time before going home. He could be going to another farm, further north in Condega. Or he could be going nowhere in particular, looking restlessly in the middle of the night for some dark, unnamed mountain that one day will be scooped out and memorialized with his tobacco. ❖

"I think the American market changes every day, there isn't a lot of brand loyalty. People like to smoke a variety of different cigars."



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The New Partagás Factory

The cigar-making facility may have moved to a new location in Havana, but the spirit of the famous Cuban cigar brand lives on BY GORDON MOTT

The Eiffel Tower in Paris, the Taj Mahal of India, New York City's Empire State Building—each edifice strikes a chord of recognition for its place. In Havana, the building that enjoys such emblematic stature is the Partagás Real Fabrica de Tabacos. Born on Calle Industria sometime in the 1850s, according to *Partagás, The Book*, the orange-and-red façade of the four-story structure with the Partagás name emblazoned across the roofline has been a beacon for every cigar lover around the world.

No longer. The factory has moved.

The new Partagás Factory is on the corner of Calle San Carlos in Central Havana, about a block down from the Romeo y Julieta factory and less than a 10-minute drive from the former Partagás venue. According to local histories, the current factory has been home to other cigar brands over the decades. It was last known as the El Rey del Mundo Factory before being ceded to Partagás, which needed a new home due to the decrepit condition of the original factory. You're greeted by an imposing cream-colored stucco façade. Steps lead up to a large, colonnaded doorway. Inside is a small, high-ceiling, entry foyer that opens into a four-story atrium with ornate wrought iron bannisters all the way around each floor. A large Cuban flag hangs in the atrium on the façade of the elevator shaft.

The factory employs 400 people under the direction of José Ramon de Perez. On a visit in early 2016, about 209 workers were on the rolling floor, with space for nearly 240. According to a factory representative, it was producing about 20,000 cigars daily at the time. The layout of the rolling floor is virtually identical to the old Partagás factory. Windows in a long row reach from waist height to the ceiling. Rollers receive their carefully portioned leaves for their blends from a storeroom at the front. A small quality-control area sits off to the side, where draw machines test the finished product for the day. One slight twist: instead of wooden planks for rolling, some stations have steel plates, which a factory representative said keeps the leaves at a more constant humidity during the rolling process. As in all Cuban cigar factories, a podium is set up for a lector who reads the news to workers from 9 to 9:30 A.M. Two half-hour-long periods later in



The new Partagás Factory (left) is the home of the Partagás brand. You can still buy cigars at the former factory (above), but cigars are no longer rolled there.

the day are devoted to novelas, or fiction books, of the workers choosing.

While the factory is the *casa matrice*, or home factory, for the Partagás brand, La Gloria Cubana, Ramon Allones, Quai d'Orsay and Bolivar cigars are also rolled there.

The facility is now one of the primary cigar factory tour stops in Havana, with hundreds of people being guided every day through the entry foyer and up the stairs to walk around the balconies, and along the outer aisles of the rolling room. Visitors are not granted access to parts of the factory other than the rolling floor. According to the factory rep, the leaf sorting room and the packing rooms are not included in the tour because they are all temperature and humidity controlled and constant traffic in and out would disrupt that.

While the new factory does not quite harbor the same soul as the original Partagás Real Fabrica de Tabacos, the sea of red Partagás work-shirts and the large photos of Partagás cigars on the wall lend an air of history and authenticity to the new venue. It's worth the trip. ❖

Rocky  Patel

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Karalyn Eifler finds the best way to celebrate her wedding day is with cigars and family. Here she is puffing away alongside her father Wayne Jordan and sister Alicia Langmayer at Brookside Country Club in Macungie, Pennsylvania.



Jim Monteton, Mike Schultz, Mel Turner and Jeff Slowey of The Victory Cigar Club, founded in Baghdad during the Iraq War, hoist past issues of CIGAR AFICIONADO magazine at a Stones Casino meeting in Citrus Heights, California.



Blake Rogers enjoys a fine cigar on his wedding day with his best man Mike Irby, groomsmen Jeff McGlashan, Dan Mallon and Eric Immerman, and friend Steven Rosenfeld at the Aldourie Castle in Loch Ness, Inverness, Scotland.



Retired members of the New York and New Jersey law enforcement communities join fellow police and corrections officers on a summer afternoon in Waldwick, New Jersey, for an annual outing dedicated to cigars and camaraderie.



Matt Nola shares a smoke with famed cigarmaker José "Don Pepin" Garcia of My Father Cigars during a cigar tasting at 7th Street Cigars in Eugene, Oregon.



Thomas Heusing rings in his son Nick's 21st birthday with a couple of fine cigars on a trip to New Orleans with their friend P. Christian Rose.



Remo Guizzo and his wife Sarah of Vancouver, British Columbia, enjoy premium cigars alongside husband and wife Bill Suman and Shirin Jessa at the Melia Marina Varadero in Cuba.



Joe Benes of Vaudreuil, Quebec, Phil Gammon of Ottawa, Ontario, and Paul Foord of Mississauga, Ontario, meet in Ottawa to ring in Canada Day the right way, with premium cigars.



Congratulations to the newlyweds! Ian and Alexandria Diaz travel all the way to Cuba for their wedding, where they celebrate by smoking excellent Cuban cigars alongside friends and family.



A LEGEND AMONG LANDMARKS

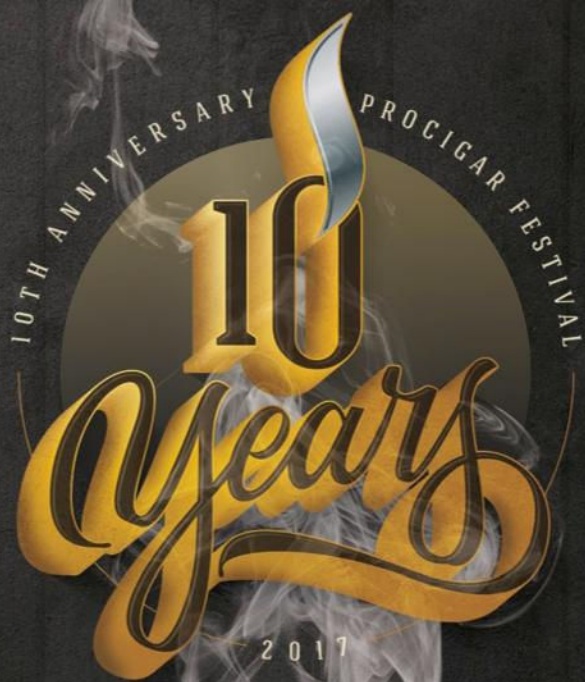
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- DOMINICAN REPUBLIC CIGAR COUNTRY -



Congressman Duncan D. Hunter, Josh Dinen, Roger White, Don McClure and Kevin Cochie savor cigars during a charity golf tournament for wounded marines in El Cajon, California.



A group of cigar-smoking buddies known as The Cigar Aficionados Smokers Club of Travis Pointe C.C. enjoy good company and, of course, a few good cigars in Ann Arbor, Michigan.



The crew aboard the U.S. Navy hospital ship, *USNS Comfort*, relax while smoking cigars as they transit the Panama Canal after completing a mission stop in Buenaventura, Colombia.

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Greg Joselove congratulates his son Reece on his high school graduation with a couple of fine Cuban cigars in Lawrenceville, Georgia.



David A. Jones, Jr. helps celebrate his girlfriend Tonya Preston's 43rd birthday with Cohiba cigars at Sambuca's in Dallas, Texas.



Bride and groom Ali Archinal and Britt McAnally savor premium cigars while surrounded by family on their wedding day at the Cotton Creek Barn in New Home, Texas, on April 25, 2015.



Tom Snow and Kelly Robinson indulge in premium cigars while playing golf at the Presidio Golf Course in San Francisco, California.



Ray Guera, Dan Palumbo, Mark Tomasino and Ricky Estupinan at the Port Washington Yacht Club cigar night in Port Washington, New York.

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Kendra and Scott Sullivan are sure to include family, fine cigars and, of course, a copy of their favorite cigar magazine at their lovely wedding in Kauai, Hawaii.



Bruce Baty of Kansas City, Kansas, and Steve Glacy of Scottsdale, Arizona, relax with Cuban cigars at Memories Miramar Hotel during a trip to Havana.



Ron McCarthy and Cecil Suddreth hold up a copy of a certain cigar magazine while smoking Cohibas at the Flint Oak Hunting Resort in Fall River, Kansas.



Ron Beer spends time with his three sons Brad, Ryan and Eric over premium cigars as they gather for a family reunion in Lake Murray, South Carolina.



Jim Kudis, Ron Brusco and Ray Kudis hit the links at Laurel Valley Golf Club in Ligonier, Pennsylvania, savoring premium cigars as they enjoy the course.



Mike Stafiej and Jim Denny share cigars at an event for the Pittsburgh Alumni Association of Phi Kappa Psi at The Duquesne Club in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.



John Lord and Tripp Keber from Denver, Colorado, enjoy some of the finest premium cigars in the world on their trip to Havana in October 2015.



Dave Wolters, Jim Brundidge, Tim Morton, Jay Pierce, Joey Edwards and Mike King savor fine cigars on the Thornapple River in Grand Rapids, Michigan.



The Forest Hills Country Club Cigar Club of Chesterfield, Missouri, bring premium cigars to the course at the third annual Putt & Puff Golf Outing and Dinner.

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Brent Roberts, Drew Simmons and Steve Snook tailgate with cigars before a Kansas City Royals game at Kauffman Stadium in Kansas City, Missouri.



The team at Morrison Products Dallas has a retirement cigar party for long-time employee Kwinn Kastrosky at En Fuego Tobacco Shop in Murphy, Texas.



Mark Piscillo and Dave Breazzano, owners of Victory Bar & Cigar in Worcester, Massachusetts, join friends to celebrate Dave's 60th birthday in York Beach, Maine.



John Wilmot, Mike Schick Tanz, Jack Wilmot and Tom Spond relax with cigars after finishing their 26th annual family golf tournament in Scottsdale, Arizona.



Friends Tony Trusso, Frank Cravato, Sean Kelly, Steve Trusso, Joe Porno, Dave Cooper and Chief Scheidt light up cigars on Derby Day in Buffalo, New York.



A couple of Padrón cigars and a glass of fine Scotch make an excellent pairing for good friends Guillermo Bermudez, Stephen Miller and Gregg Heppner.

CIGAR AFICIONADO (ISSN #1063-7885) is published bimonthly by M. Shanken Communications, Inc., Worldwide Plaza, 825 Eighth Avenue, 33rd floor, New York, NY 10019. (212) 684-4224. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY and at additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Address changes and subscription inquiries: CIGAR AFICIONADO, P.O. Box 37367 Boone, IA 50037-0367; call 1-800-365-4929; or email cgacustserv@cdsfulfillment.com. Subscription rates: United States, \$19.95 per year; Canada, \$38.00 per year; all other foreign, \$56.00. Subscriptions are payable in U.S. funds. TO ORDER A NEW SUBSCRIPTION, call 1-800-992-2442, email cgacustserv@cdsfulfillment.com, or write to aforementioned Boone address. To order back issues, call 1-800-761-4099. Unsolicited manuscripts will not be returned, and no responsibility can be assumed for such material. All "Letters to the Editor" should be sent to the editor at the aforementioned New York address. All rights in letters sent to CIGAR AFICIONADO will be treated as unconditionally assigned for publication and copyright purposes and subject to CIGAR AFICIONADO's unrestricted right to edit. CIGAR AFICIONADO® is a registered trademark of M. Shanken Communications, Inc. All rights reserved. Nothing may be reprinted or reproduced in whole or in part without written permission from the publisher. Copyright © 2016, M. Shanken Communications, Inc. To sell CIGAR AFICIONADO call: 1-800-344-0763.





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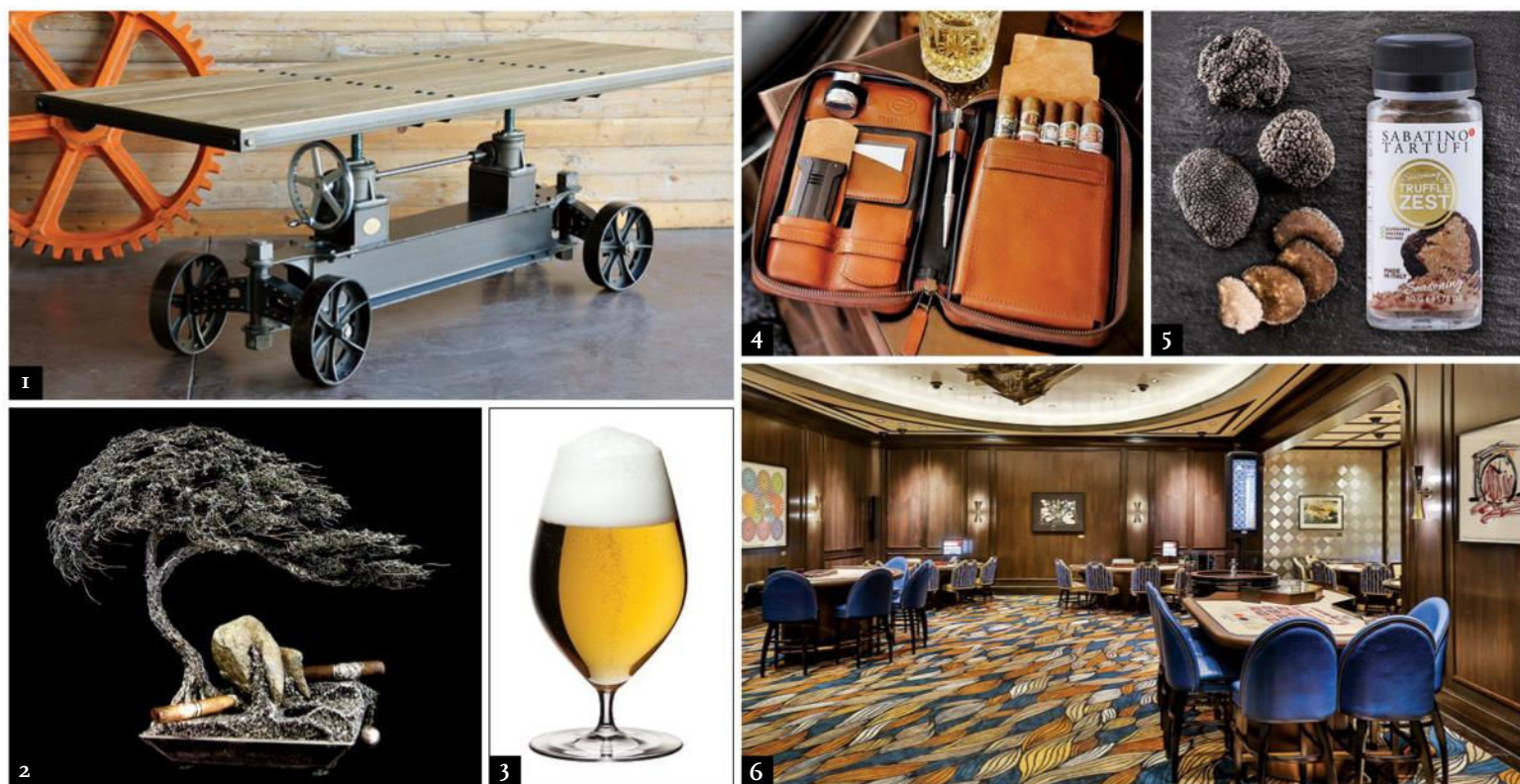


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1 TABLES GO STEAM PUNK—VINTAGE INDUSTRIAL

Fans of the steam-punk movement’s Victorian-era aesthetic (cranks, valves, gears and mechanical machinations) will be riveted by the Train Crank Table from Vintage Industrial. It is part miner’s cart, part pump trolley and all table, with steel or wooden tops and distressed finishes. Turn the crank to adjust from 30" (dining height) to 42" (bar height). Base models start at \$14,695, but can be customized. Vintage Industrial will even install tracks in the floor if you want to take your love of locomotives to the next level. retro.net

2 ARTISTIC ASHTRAYS—IRON HAMMER FORGE

Blacksmith/artist Gerald Biresch turned his love of cigars and skill at sculpting metal into ashtrays that are pieces of art, yet functional. Each is unique, made by Biresch with a wire-feed welder using techniques he has honed over 25 years. They range from subtle, clever inserts built into old metal cigar boxes to ornate bonsai trees made entirely of built-up welds that provide shelter for your cigars. Each is designed to hold the ash and butts in a receptacle, and the bigger models feature drawers for quick and easy cleanup. Prices range from \$100 to more than \$5,000. ironhammerforge.wordpress.com

3 IN BEER-US VERITAS—RIEDEL

Tired of your perfectly poured beer warming up? Then think thin. Austrian glassmaker Riedel, best known for its high-end wine glassware, has brought its knack for innovation to its homeland’s drink of choice with its new Veritas Beer Glass (\$69/set of two). The walls of the glass are incredibly thin with less mass, meaning they don’t retain heat like thicker glasses do. Plus, the teardrop shape ensures your favorite craft beer will taste and smell the way the brewer intended. riedel.com

4 THE CIGAR KIT BAG—PETER JAMES AFICIONADO CASE

Cigar accessories, such as lighters and cutters, are great to own, but a real pain to carry around. The Peter James Leather Aficionado Case is like a shaving kit bag for your cigars and tools, with different straps and pockets for your lighter, cutter, cigar stand, pen, business cards and four or five of your favorite smokes. Unlike many plastic or metal cigar cases that are clunky and cumbersome to hold, the Aficionado Case is handcrafted from full-grain leather and slim enough to fit in your briefcase or carry on its own as a statement piece. It comes in black or cognac and starts at \$265. peterjames.ca

5 TRUFFLE SEASON EXTENDED—SABATINO TARTUFI

What’s a true truffle fan to do in autumn? It’s too late for summer truffles and too early for winter truffles. Truffle oil isn’t an option, as its flavoring is mostly synthetic. Sabatino Tartufi has solved this trifling truffle conundrum with its Truffle Zest—a fragrant mixture of ground Umbrian black truffles punched up with some carob powder and salt. Generously sprinkle it on pasta, pizza, butter or any other truffle application you can think of until this most noble tuber comes back into season. sabatinostruffles.com

6 LIQUOR LOCKER—THE TALON CLUB AT THE COSMOPOLITAN

Even if you’re unlucky at cards, you can at least ensure some drinking success at The Talon, the high-stakes gaming room in The Cosmopolitan of Las Vegas. You can store bottles of your choosing in the custom-made Scotch lockers. Moreover, the club, which recently expanded the gaming area, provides its own upscale drinking choices, including Hardy Perfection Cognac from the 19th century. There’s an in-house sommelier and custom cocktails, as well as a private kitchen with butler service. cosmopolitanlasvegas.com

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